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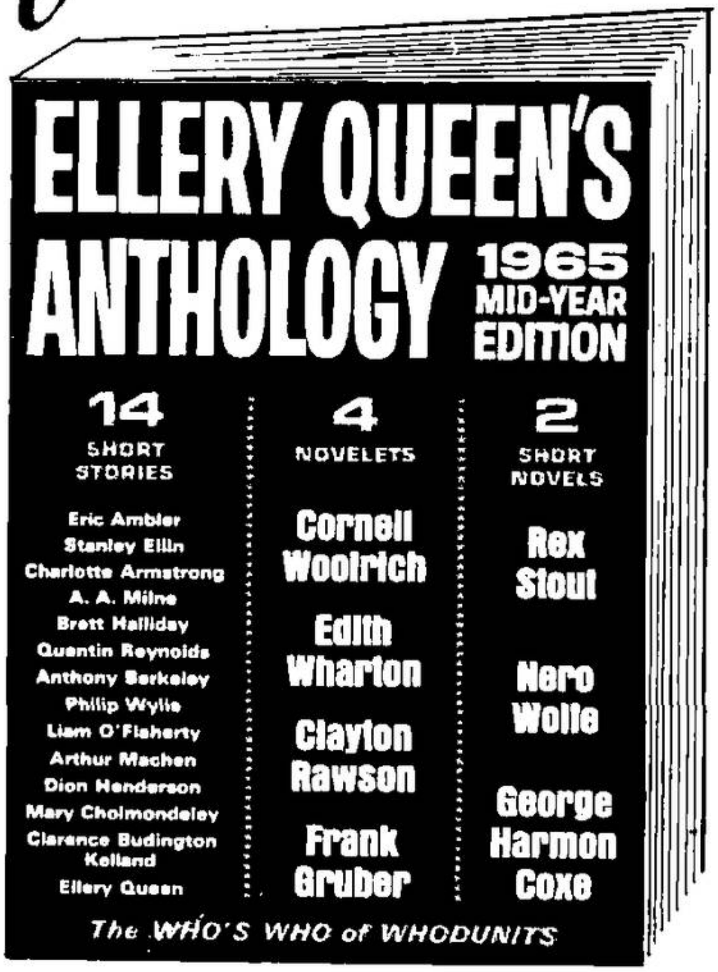
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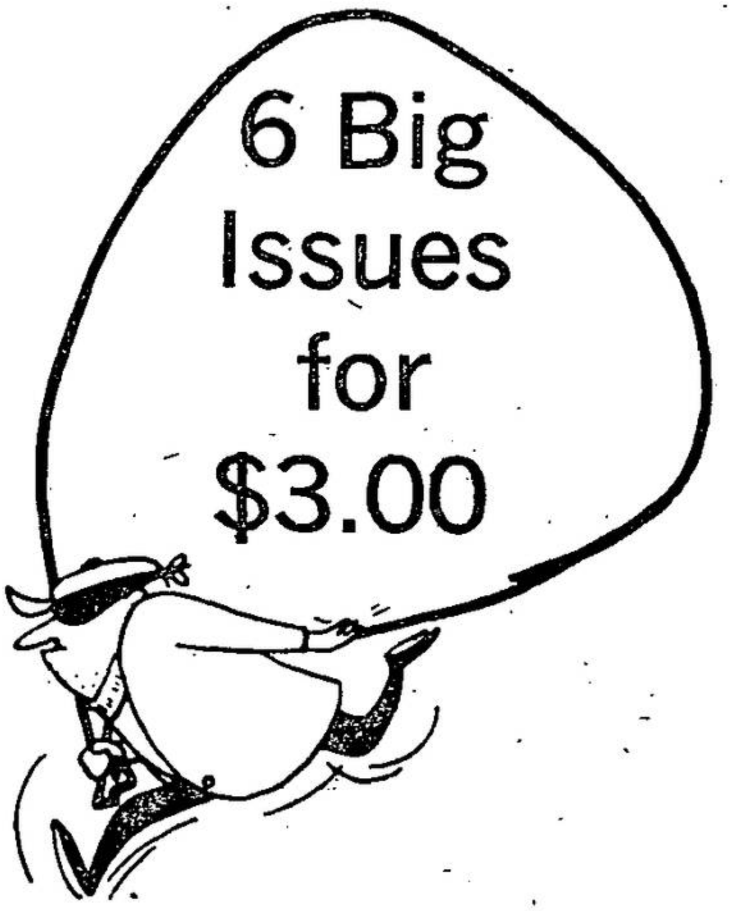

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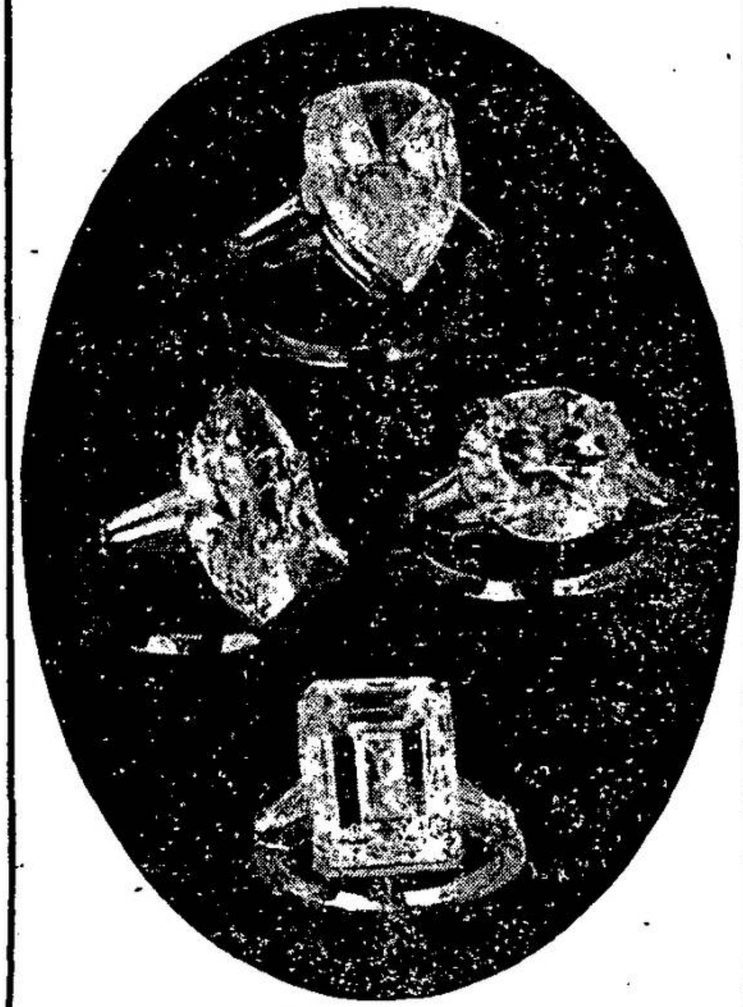

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THE GUN WITH WINGS *Rex Stout* 117

CRIME STORIES

THE DAY THE THAW CAME TO 127 *Stanley Ellin* 6
SIMPLE JUSTICE *Charles Norman* 27
INDIAN SUMMER *L. E. Behney* 39
THE TIGER'S STRIPE *Julian Symons* 51
END OF THE DAY *Jane Speed* 84
THE HANGMAN'S FISH *John Bingham* 101

DETECTIVE STORIES

THE GEOMETRY OF THE SKIRT *Gerald Kersh* 15
POIROT MAKES AN INVESTMENT *Agatha Christie* 32
THE PRESIDENT'S HALF DISME *Ellery Queen* 67
THE POISON NECKLACE *Miriam Allen deFord* 91
B AS IN BULLETS *Lawrence Treat* 104
HARDCOVERS AND PAPERBACKS OF THE MONTH 26
BEST MYSTERIES OF 1964 *Anthony Boucher* 99

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the *NEWEST* story by
STANLEY ELLIN

Stanley Ellin's annual appearance in EQMM—how we all welcome it! . . . To your Editors, who have published all of Mr. Ellin's crime and detective short stories since that remarkable "first" ("The Specialty of the House," now a contemporary classic), it is absolutely extraordinary that so completely American a writer as Stanley Ellin should write so thoroughly Gallic a story as "The Day the Thaw Came to 127." Think of the great French short-story writers as you read Mr. Ellin's newest tale . . . Many times in EQMM's 24-year history we have told you that a particular story is memorable. Now we say it again. The proof in this instance? Ask yourself, when you have finished, if you will ever *forget "The Day the Thaw Came to 127"* . . .

THE DAY THE THAW CAME TO 127

by STANLEY ELLIN

Every winter the tenants of Number 127 would develop an almost maniacal desire for heat, for the sound of steam pipes clanking and radiators singing, for the delicious feeling of warmth enfolding them, penetrating the very bone. It was bad enough other times of the year what with the paint peeling, the plaster falling, the electricity failing, the woodwork rotting, and the water leaking; but these were troubles which, taken one by one, could be lived with. The absence of heat in the winter, however, was regarded by the tenants of 127 as no mere trouble. It was a disaster.

In all fairness to the landlord it must be said that he did permit a few pieces of coal to be thrown into the furnace each day. Not quite enough to keep the blood from congealing, perhaps, but at least enough to keep the water pipes from freezing. One could detect these periods by placing an ungloved hand on the radiator and finding the metal a little less frigid than usual, but that was all.

"In my opinion," said C-1 who was old and bearded and thus inclined to be philosophical, "no heat at all is better. That way we face reality. This way we are encouraged to dream, to imagine a fantastic way of life where it is not necessary to wear an overcoat in the living room."

"But why not dream?" demanded C-4 fiercely. He was a young man whose wife had a persistent cold in the head. "I tell you that some day you will hear these radiators sing like birds. Some day —!"

"Enthusiast," said C-1, shaking his head pityingly. "Fanatic. Tell that to the landlord and see what it gets you."

But despite his pessimism, the tenants sustained themselves with the dream.

"Some day," they said.

"Even one day," said the more practical ones. "Just one little day when the fire roars in the furnace."

"Maybe Christmas Day."

"Maybe New Year's."

"Dreamers," said C-1 sadly, combing his fingers through his long beard. "See what it gets you."

It was hard to dispute him. Uselessly, they all descended together on the office of the Department of Buildings. Together they stood in court to plead their cause. Together they banged on the radiators and went downstairs to demand their rights of the janitor.

The janitor was a small, unshaven man who drank heavily and hated the tenants as much as he feared the landlord. In return for his meagre services he was given free tenancy of a cubbyhole in the cellar next to the coal bin which he guarded like Cerberus.

When the tenants knocked at his door, he would throw it open, then dance drunkenly around his little room, skipping from side to side, his fists flailing the air like a prizefighter's.

"Come on," he would shout, "I'm ready. One at a time or all together. I'm ready!" he would cry, shadowboxing furiously; and swinging his fists he would sometimes throw himself off balance and fall to the floor. Then he would crawl unsteadily to his feet and start the make-believe battle again.

"Hit but not hurt," he would gasp. "Down but not out. Come on!"—until the tenants would leave in a rage.

So nothing helped. And A-3 who had six children and worked as busboy in an expensive restaurant said that he had it on good authority—the brother-in-law of the salad chef was a court clerk—that the landlord must be bribing city officials to close their eyes to his shortcomings.

"From what I was told," said A-3 hopelessly, "This is not unusual for either landlords or city officials."

"Especially such a landlord as ours," said D-4 who was a stout widow with a mustache and a remarkably beautiful daughter.

In truth, it was possible to believe anything about the landlord. On the first day of each month he came to collect rents, because one thing the law had impressed on the tenants of 127 was that rents must be paid, no matter their complaints. Tenants' complaints were one thing, landlord's rents another, and there must be no confusion between the two. So the landlord collected rents door by door, stirring up fury as he went by his arrogance, his duplicity, his very appearance.

He was a short, fat man, so fat that when he sat down to write a receipt for the rent he had to lower his belly into his lap with his hands. His eyes were small and menacing. His mouth was pursed with disapproval. Worst of all, he had a tongue like a whiplash.

"You're cold?" he told C-1. "Do you know why you're cold? Because you're an old man, that's why. You think your beard will keep you warm? You think all the coal I burn will keep you warm? Never. What you should do, old man, is save your pennies and move to a fine house in the tropics. A beautiful hacienda with a heated swimming pool—that's what you need at your age."

And to B-2 who worked as a butcher's apprentice he said, "You're cold even with all the heat I give you? Naturally. After working like a donkey in a refrigerator all day, how can you ever warm up?"

B-1 especially angered him. "More heat?" the landlord roared. "More painting, more everything? But you're on relief, in case you forget. Relief. Taxpayer's money—that's what you're living on. And I am a taxpayer. You ought to thank me for my money instead of making trouble. Try sleeping on a park bench tonight and see how warm you'll be."

So each tenant in turn had his complaint used against him, although a few escaped more lightly. These the landlord would deal with humorously.

"More heat?" he would say, and look around the room with stupefaction. "But it's unbearable here as it is. Look at me," he would say, tearing open his collar, "I can hardly breathe. I'm stifling. Please open the window before I faint."

Only with D-4 was he circumspect. There, sometimes the beautiful daughter of the stout widow would open the door to him, and when he saw her his eyes would glitter appreciatively. Not even the loudest complaints of D-4 disturbed him then, not even the slap in the face he once got from the beautiful daughter when he went so far as to pat her enticing behind.

So the tenants of Number 127 lived with their dream.

"Some day."

"One day—just one day when the furnace roars and the radiators sing."

"Christmas perhaps. Or do you think it will be New Year's?"

But again Christmas passed, and then New Year's.

"Dreamers," said C-1 who spent many daylight hours dozing in the public library over pictures of tropical islands. "You will be warm again when summer comes."

Even the visionary C-4, whose wife always had a cold in the head, found the dream growing dim. One day he brought home an electric heater, and for three minutes he and his wife stood before it, rejoicing in its radiance. Then the radiance suddenly vanished. The lights in the room went out. All the lights in the building went out.

"Idiot," snarled the janitor as he replaced the fuse in the cellar. "Do you think the wiring here was made for fancy electric heaters? Do you know what a fuse costs? Wait until I tell the landlord about this."

But it was not the landlord who came to collect rents the next month. In his place came a young man as tall as the landlord was short, as thin as the landlord was fat, as gentle in manner as the landlord was ferocious. Behind his thick eyeglasses shone large, kindly, nearsighted eyes. Yet, to the astonishment of the tenants, he said that he was the landlord's son.

"Incredible," said C-1. "For a wolf to produce a lamb is altogether against nature. I suppose you resemble your mother?"

The landlord's son smiled sadly. "That would be hard to tell, since she died a long time ago. However, I must admit that my father and I seem to have very little in common."

"And how is he?" C-1 asked hopefully. "Has something bad happened to him?"

"No, he sent me in his place to learn the business. Since I will inherit it some day, he feels I should know how to manage it properly when the times comes."

"Would you like to start by hearing a few complaints?" said C-1.

"Certainly."

"Do you mean that?" said C-1, clutching the young man's arm.

"Of course. I will write all your complaints in this notebook."

"Then what?"

"Then I will give the notebook to my father."

"Thank you," said C-1. "Here is your rent and goodbye."

So it went from one tenant to the next, with the landlord's son growing more pitiable and apologetic with each rebuff.

"But what else can I do?" he pleaded, holding out his notebook and pencil.

"*Tell the janitor to give us heat.*"

"I'm not allowed to tell the janitor anything."

"Then put some coal in the furnace yourself."

"I'm not allowed to."

"Well, thank you," said the tenants scornfully. "Here is your rent and goodbye."

At last the landlord's son came to the door of D-4, the apartment of the stout widow with the mustache and the beautiful daughter. He knocked on the door, and the daughter opened it. He looked at her and turned pale with emotion. His knees buckled. He tried to speak but his voice failed him.

"You are beautiful," he finally managed to whisper.

She blushed and hung her head.

"A vision," he said fervently. "From my childhood days I have been writing poetry. Now I know it was being written only for you."

She regarded him with wondering eyes. "But I don't even know who you are."

"True, true. How stupid of me. I am the landlord's son, come to collect the rent."

"And you write poetry?"

"Yes, whenever I am inspired I write poetry. Here, look at the last page in my notebook. This was written only yesterday."

She read it. "It's a real poem," she said with awe. "I never knew anybody who could write a real poem."

"It's nothing. It needs a lot of work yet. But when it's finished I'll give it to you."

"To me?"

"Yes."

They swayed toward each other.

"Would you like some coffee?" whispered the beautiful daughter of D-4. "It's cold here."

"Yes, I know," said the young man. "The front of the notebook is for complaints."

Before long, all the tenants of Number 127 were buzzing with gossip about the landlord's son and the beautiful daughter of D-4.

"Every morning he sends her a poem in the mail."

"Every Saturday night he visits her."

"He is madly in love with her."

"Why not?" sighed B-2, the butcher's apprentice, who was secretly in love with her himself.

"And she returns his love."

"She is making a mistake," said B-2 gloomily. "He is a weakling without muscle. Now here is what I call muscle," he said, flexing his mighty biceps.

"But," pointed out the elderly C-1, "with all of that, can you write one little poem?"

They plied the widow of D-4 with questions.

"It is true," she said. "Every Saturday night they sit on the couch in their overcoats and look at each other."

"Is that all?"

"No. He talks and she listens."

"You are to be commended," said C-1, nodding his beard. "Very few young girls have been brought up nowadays to listen."

"Never mind that," said the others. "Will they be married soon?"

D-4 shook her head sadly. "I am afraid not. His father has told him he will be disinherited if he ever dares to marry a poor girl."

"What a monster!"

"You have no idea," said D-4, her upper lip curled in a sneer which almost hid her mustache. "His father gives him nothing but threats and curses. The unfortunate boy doesn't have money enough in his pocket to take my daughter to the movies."

"He should do something about it!" cried the fiery C-4, the one whose wife always had a cold in the head, and whose electric heater stood useless in the corner of the closet.

"But what?" said D-4. "All he knows how to do is write poetry and collect rents. What can he do but wait for the day when he will inherit this house and the twelve others his father also owns?"

"It shows you," said C-1 philosophically, "that being a landlord's son is not all milk and honey."

"What difference does it make?" said B-2, the butcher's apprentice. "Whenever the day comes, he will be no better than his father."

"Aha," said D-4 triumphantly, "and there you are wrong. He has told my daughter that when he is landlord, everything will be different. There will be heat day and night. There will be painting—"

"Two coats?"

"Two coats of the very best paint. Or wallpaper for those who want it."

"Wallpaper!"

"And," said D-4, "repairs to the plumbing when it leaks."

They were all silent, awed.

"May heaven speed the day," murmured C-1 at last, stroking his beard with trembling fingers.

The eyes of the fiery C-4 narrowed. He looked from one to the other. "Heaven?" he said softly. "But why must it be left to heaven?"

For a moment his words puzzled them. Then understanding dawned. With it came a growing excitement. They knew that they all shared the same thought, and this gave them courage.

Yet some wavered.

"It's illegal."

"What if it is? Let's not split hairs."

"It's unkind."

"But to whom?"

"It's dangerous."

"No," said the fiery C-4 commandingly, "it is not dangerous."

His tone swept all doubts away.

"Listen," he said, as they gathered around him, "and I will explain what must be done."

By the next day every tenant of Number 127 understood his role. By Saturday he was letter-perfect in it. All that day the wind howled and the snow piled high.

"Good," said the tenants. "Tonight will be the night."

Darkness came early. The children were fed their suppers and allowed to watch television. They liked especially to watch shows where cowboys and Indians fought in the desert under a blazing sun which made heat waves shimmer on the sand. Over the noise of television could be heard the sound of the front door opening and closing. Then footsteps ascended flight after flight of stairs.

"He's here," whispered the tenants to each other. "It's the landlord's son."

"Even weather like this couldn't keep him away from her."

"What a monster his father is to treat him so cruelly," they whispered, hardening their hearts.

When the cowboy and Indian shows were over, the children turned to their mothers and fathers and said they didn't want to go to bed, they wanted to watch more television.

"All right," said the mothers and fathers, smiling. "Watch more television."

"What!" said the children suspiciously.

"Don't argue," said the fathers sternly. "And turn up the sound so that we can all hear it a little better."

The children put aside their suspicions and sat down again to watch a show about gangsters in Miami Beach where the sun beat down fiercely on palm trees.

A-3 was keeping his eyes fixed on the clock in his kitchen. At the appointed moment he took a bottle of whiskey he had brought from the restaurant where he was busboy, and went down to the cellar. He knocked on the janitor's door, and the janitor flung it open.

"Come on!" he shouted threateningly, putting up his firsts. "One at a time or all together!"

"No, no," said A-3. "I'm your friend. See what I brought you?"

He held out the bottle, and the janitor greedily snatched it from his hand. While A-3 watched in amazement, the janitor put the bottle to his lips, and throwing his head back he drained it to the bottom. With a wild cry he threw the bottle against the wall where it smashed to bits.

"Come on!" he said drunkenly, trying to raise his fists again, and then his eyes turned up in his head and he fell flat on his back to the floor. A-3 bent over him and poked him in the shoulder, but the janitor only lay still and snored so loud that it made the room shake.

A-3 left the room, closing the door tight behind him. Then he climbed to the top floor of the house and tapped on the door of D-4. The stout widow opened it.

"Now?" she said.

"Now," said A-3.

As she followed him downstairs to the street hallway where a telephone hung on the wall, the other tenants joined them.

"What about the landlord's son?" asked B-2, the butcher's apprentice, with a touch of jealousy.

"He and my daughter are sitting on the couch in their overcoats," answered D-4. "They are holding hands and looking at each other."

"Good," said the tenants.

"Yes," said D-4, "they're living in a dreamland. Nothing can distract them from each other."

She picked up the telephone and called the landlord's number.

"Hello," she said. "This is your tenant D-4 in Number 127."

"Who?" said the landlord, and then one could almost hear him licking his lips. "Yes, yes, you're the one with the daughter."

"Right. That's what I want to talk to you about."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean my daughter," said D-4 loudly, "and your son."

"What? What was that?"

"You heard me."

"I must have heard wrong," said the landlord. "My son has no time for girls. He's in his room every night of the week studying books on real estate. He is there at this very minute."

"Is he?" said D-4. "Well, I will wait while you see for yourself that he is not."

In two minutes the landlord was back at the telephone.

"He is gone!" he said in a fury. "Where is he?"

"Here with my daughter."

"What are they doing?"

"Do you have to ask?" said D-4 in a suggestive voice.

"Then it's your daughter's fault. I knew the first time I saw her the kind of girl she was!"

"Ha ha."

"She wants the money he'll inherit!"

"Ha ha."

"Don't laugh," the landlord said, beside himself. "I'm coming there to put a stop to this myself." Then he groaned. "But how can I? With this snowstorm I can't even get my car out of the garage. I can't even take a bus, because the buses have stopped running."

"Walk."

"Walk?"

"Why not?" said D-4 mockingly. "Your son did."

That was all the landlord needed. "Wait!" he cried. "I'll be there as soon as I can. Then you'll see what'll happen."

"You'd better hurry," said D-4. "Otherwise you may be too late."

All the tenants waited in the hallway. At last the landlord came through the front door, stamping his feet and beating the snow from his shoulders. He looked astonished at the sight of the tenants gathered there.

"What is this?" he demanded of D-4. "Do you want the whole world to know our business?"

"Believe me," she told him, "Not a word of it will ever be heard outside Number 127."

"Not a word," said all the tenants.

"Well, I'm grateful for that much," said the landlord sarcastically. He looked around. "What is that noise? I never heard such a racket."

"The children are watching television."

"Are they all deaf? I can hardly hear myself think. And where is my son? Lead me to him at once."

"Down there."

"In the cellar?" said the landlord. "I don't believe you."

The tenants surrounded him and pushed him down the cellar steps.

"What are you doing?" he shouted. "Stop pushing me! Where is my son?"

"Never mind your precious son," the tenants said.

They gathered around him before the furnace. Some held him tightly. Others neatly spread newspapers on the floor. B-2, the butcher's apprentice, unrolled a long cloth which contained shining knives and cleavers.

"Please be careful with these," B-2 warned the tenants. "They must be back in the shop tomorrow morning."

The landlord watched all this with mounting horror.

"What are you going to do?" he asked in a frightened voice.

"You'll soon find out. Now please take off your coat."

"Never."

They removed his coat.

"But it's cold here," the landlord pleased. "I can't stand such cold."

"You'll soon be warm."

"Help!" the landlord shouted. "Help!" But all that could be heard in answer was the snoring of the janitor asleep in his room.

After a while the mothers went upstairs.

"That's enough television," they told the children. "Go to bed."

"But we want to watch more television."

"That's enough for now," the mothers said affectionately. "Tomorrow is another day."

Later the men came upstairs rolling down their sleeves. There was not a sound to be heard in Number 127 as they all waited.

Then they looked at each other.

"Listen, do you hear it?"

"This radiator is growing hot."

"This one, too."

"Be careful not to burn yourself on that pipe," C-4 warned his wife who always had a cold in the head.

The elderly C-1 sniffed through his beard. "There seems to be a slightly unpleasant odor in the hallway."

"I'll put more coal on the fire," said A-3. "The smell will soon go away."

"Yes," said C-1. "And while you're at it, stir the fire with the poker. Give it a good stirring. It must need it by now."

In D-4 the beautiful daughter looked at the landlord's son with wide eyes.

"I must be dreaming," she said in wondering tones. "It seems to be getting so warm here."

"You are not dreaming," he assured her. "I suppose the janitor became so drunk that he built up an extraordinarily big fire. How lucky for us on such a bitter night."

"But it's not bitter any more," she said, putting her arms around him. "It's like springtime now."

And all through Number 127 the radiators sang like birds.

The first appearance in EQMM of another of Gerald Kersh's irresistible characters—Vara the Tailor who, like Karmesin, is a marvelous teller of tales, but, unlike Karmesin, is a detective at heart, not a criminal. For, as Vara the Tailorman explained: "A proper tailor misses nothing. You must be like a diagnostician who deduces what ails you from which muscles you favor and how you carry yourself and the expression of your face. Well, a tailor learns to read the expression of a hip."

THE GEOMETRY OF THE SKIRT

by GERALD KERSH

FEELING IN THE POCKETS OF MY overcoat before pressing it, and finding a certain little paperbound book, Vara, the Demon Tailor of Columbus Avenue, picked up the book between finger and thumb and held it out to me at arm's length while his mouth puckered in a scorn so astringent that it formed a little *m*.

"It's a suspense story," I protested. "The hero is a Secret Service man. He gets electrocuted but crawls along a red-hot stovepipe through a den of black widow spiders to fight a school of barracuda before he kills a hundred-foot squid with a wire clothes-hanger."

"So?" said Vara the Tailor with a shrug.

"Ah, but after that he is stung by Portuguese man-o'-war jellyfish, scorched by flame throwers, bombed with T.N.T., and then thrown into a vat of boiling glue."

"And so?"

"He climbs out, locks the villian in a bell-buoy, and throws it into the sea. The villain being Chinese, of course, the bell goes *Chang-Chang-Chang* to this day."

"Is that all?"

"The hero puts salve on his wounds and then, on a government expense account, he and a beautiful blonde go to a posh hotel and eat hamburgers with Liebfraumilch—"

"No!" shouted Vara. "Liebfraumilch and hamburgers is impossible! And if a book like this falls into the hands of Mrs. Vara—squids, glue, Liebfraumilch and hamburger—anything for kicks, sensation for its own sake and damn the consequences! —where, oh, where is reality?" cried Vara, clutching his feathery gray temples.

I said, "It's only a story—"

"Only a story, only a story—I am the victim of a story! Mrs. Vara, having read about cowboys and bucking broncos, made me come to America because she was convinced I could get a fast buck in the Bronx. Life is too tame for these story-tellers—it must be twisted into a plot with squids and suspense and coat hangers.

"And you might think the fellows who wrote these stories, knowing what they're made of, would be the last to swallow them. But no. A person who breaks his head inventing unlikely stories for Mrs. Vara to drug herself with is himself the first to fall for such a story, and the unlikelier it is the harder he falls. He strains at a gnat but swallows a whale. The trouble is, sane people get sucked in and mixed up with their romances.

"Yes, even I! And believe me, it was a bad business—a horror story, if you please, on West 73rd Street." Vara, who prefers a captive audience, pushed me into a cubicle and took my trousers away to press, continuing, "I only hope and pray the matter never comes to Mrs. Vara's ears, or it'll be 'Sherlock Shrimp, where's your clay pipe?' or 'Hopalong Shrimp on a clotheshorse.'

"And just for once, whatever she says will be half right, because it was partly my own fault. A first-rate tailor should be a sharp observer, also a diplomat—which I admit I am; but a sensible diplomat knows when to keep his clever observations to himself. It was here that I slipped, and before I knew where I was, a young story-teller dragged me in—a young lady, very harmless and pretty and frightened, asking if I did alterations.

"I said, 'Young lady, I am Vara the Tailorman, the one who studied under the immortal Schultze of Savile Row, London. What? We threw King Edward VII out of our shop for questioning the hang of a sleeve; we kicked the Archduke of Albania downstairs for demanding brocade facings to a body-coat; we practically caused war with France when we refused their Ambassador as a customer. Can I do alterations? Mademoiselle, I can.'

"So forgetting whatever business she had come to ask about, she said, 'Tell me more.' So I did—not in a talkative or boastful way, but in civil response to her intelligent interest.

"I gave her a thumbnail sketch of my early career among the crowned heads of Europe and the celebrities of my time. You know: how I fitted velvet riding breeches to LaBarra the lady violoncellist; the trouble I had with evening dress for the Siamese twins born to—but never mind. Soon, seeing that she was writing in a notebook, I asked her why.

"'I want to write a story about you,' she said.

"'Ah, you are a writer? For whom?'

"'All the best magazines.'

"'Then I must have read some of your work?'

"'I don't think so because none of it has ever got accepted,' said this nice girl. 'I have studied Creative Writing under . . . Mr. Whatsisname, the author of Thus-and-So. I am always looking for story ideas.'

"Now, how could I help taking a fatherly interest in her?" said Vara.

This girl moved dreamily, like a sleepwalker, and had a tiny little lost voice (Vara continued). You felt that if you made a sudden noise she might twitch, scream "Where am I?" and perhaps die on the spot of shock. That, or vanish with a forlorn cry—for she was in a way ghostly, and so slender that you had to look at her twice to see her.

She was five foot eight tall but otherwise to be measured with calipers, for she was not much more rounded than a tape measure, though supple. She had pearly skin, flowing brown hair, and startled pale blue eyes—a type of the day before yesterday, you understand, though wearing a leotard. I do not much care for ethereal girls, yet she struck me as peculiarly charming, her lack of substance notwithstanding.

I said to her, "What about an article on the decline of wool?" I took down a customer's suit I had been working on. "Here's a garment made twenty-five years ago. It is good for another twenty-five: a sound Cheviot of olive- and bottle-green bird's-eye with a black block overcheck. Where, nowadays—"

I stopped, because she was staring, open-mouthed.

"Doesn't that belong to a Miss Lovelace?" she said.

"Why, yes," I told her, "a Miss Rosalie Lovelace. You know the lady?"

"My name is Lucy Lovelace—and Rosalie Lovelace is my aunt," she explained. "I remember that suit well. But you're wrong, if you'll excuse me—that suit is *Valerie* Lovelace's, not Rosalie's. Valarie is the one who always wears checks. Rosalie invariably wears solid-color French woolens, whether suits or dresses, and of a much lighter weave."

I said, "I could be mistaken. I *could*. I have handled clothes for both ladies. Twins—I think?"

"Yes, identical. That's why Valerie wears checks and Rosalie wears solid colors. But you have it the wrong way round."

"Well," I said, "it makes no difference. I thought it was the other way about. But the ladies must have been wealthy in their time—to afford such wardrobes as they still have."

"They *are* wealthy," said Lucy Lovelace. "Rolling in money."

"Likely enough," I said, "considering their extreme reluctance to part with it. Only rich people practice such bitter economy. And yet," I went on, "people who spend their money on such stuff as this"—feeling the cloth— "can't be miserly.

Rich, but clinging to bygone standards of high quality, surely?"

"Stingy, like Hetty Green," said Lucy Lovelace. "Millionaires. At least."

I said, "I infer from a certain grain of bitterness in your tone—although it is none of my business—that you are not exactly rolling in money? I ask only in order that I may adapt my prices to your purse, young lady."

"You're very sweet, but I have enough to get by. What a kind man you are!"

"Tell me about your wicked aunts."

She said, "They aren't exactly wicked; only mean, grasping, quarrelsome, stingy, acquisitive, and vindictive. They hate everybody. Why, they won't even talk to each other!"

"This," I said, "is unusual in identical twins."

"As you see, they're too cheap to get new clothes—"

"Ah-ah! Cottons, perhaps, and light silks. But cloth of this sort you hold onto for years and years; it goes out of style, comes back, gets remade, but never wears out. They are right to keep such stuff—they have breathed into it and it has breathed into them. So why part with it? And why shouldn't they talk to each other?"

"Because of a man, ever so many years ago," said Lucy Lovelace. "Valerie and Rosalie were inseparable. They walked about with their arms around each other's waists, in identical frocks and identical hats, looking like carbon copies of each other. It was thought cute once upon a time, you know. Well, then this man came along—rich, good-looking, aristocratic. Of course, Valerie and Rosalie both fell in love with him at the same time."

"And he?"

"They were pretty and rich. He fell in love with them."

I said, "Hold hard! *Them?* Both of them?"

"Ah, that is the point. He couldn't very well have fallen in love with both of them, could he? So he fell in love with either one or the other of them, but he didn't know—since he never saw either of them alone for very long at one time—which was which!"

"This," I said, "is sheer romance. Then he liked their looks, and nothing more. Finish!"

She said, "It's so hard to know, isn't it? People get to be so exactly alike, and love being in the mind of the lover. . . . Anyway, he couldn't very well break one of them out and put her in a corral and stamp a brand on her and say, 'You're the one'—now could he?"

"I smell melodrama here," I said.

"There wasn't any," said Lucy Lovelace. "He did the reasonable thing: he went away and married somebody quite different, and that was that."

"Good," I said, "very sensible—I hope he lived happily ever after."

"Yes. But Valerie and Rosalie had an awful fight about it. Each accused the other of stealing her man and wrecking her life. . . ." At this Lucy Lovelace sighed, sticking out her lower lip and poking at it with a pencil; and then she said, "But what a situation it could be for a play or a story! Sort of like *A Rose for Emily*."

"What's *A Rose for Emily*?"

"A story by William Faulkner: a lady, jilted, poisons her fiance with arsenic and keeps his body in her room for forty years. Now if Valerie and Rosalie could have—"

"Enough!" I shouted.

"I don't mean poisoned him," she said, "just kept him jointly, locked up."

"That is worse yet," I said. "They didn't, I trust?"

"No, I told you he married some other girl. But it's a good story idea, don't you think? It has possibilities?"

"It is a horrid idea," I told her. Then I made a brilliant little joke; and I should say here that whereas you should think twice before you talk, you should bite your tongue before making brilliant little jokes, especially—what are they called—spoonerisms. I said, "This isn't a case of *A Rose for Emily*—this is *A Hem for Rosalie*."

She said, "Or Valerie. I think you've got them mixed up." My little joke had missed, and now she had me piqued.

I asked, "What d'you mean, mixed up? How long since *you* saw them last?"

"Not since I was very young—"

"And now you are very old. I asked, if you please, how long? Fifty years ago? Forty? Thirty? Even twenty?"

"I am twenty-four," she said with dignity. "It must be fifteen years since I saw either of them."

"Yet these ladies are at least sixty years old," I said.

"More like seventy. They had their quarrel forty-five years ago."

"So you didn't see them separately. So how can you tell them apart?" I asked. "Do not imagine for one moment that this is a matter of importance to me. No. But like an anagram, or a crossword puzzle, or the catch of a tune, or a word on the tip of your tongue, or a rough edge to your fingernail, the matter is vexatious. They may be your aunts, but they are my customers, and I will back my eye against yours. How can you tell them apart, please?"

"I told you: Valerie took to wearing checks, and Rosalie always wore plain clothes," said Lucy Lovelace.

I said, "Listen: I have altered their skirts, my dear young lady. Unless I have quite gone out of my mind—and this, too, is possible—it is Rosalie for whom I have been remodeling the tweeds and the herringbones, and Valerie who wears the Anglo-French Dormeuil Freres designs. Come now—is there no other way you have of differentiating the Misses Valerie and Rosalie Lovelace?"

She said, "Well, yes. Rosalie invariably walked on Valerie's left whenever they went out. So, though they stuck together like glue, one could always tell which was which, especially when they were very young, by the side they carried their school bags on. They had those bags slung on long straps, you know. Rosalie hung hers over her right shoulder and crossed it over so that it bounced on her left hip; Valerie's was over her left shoulder and therefore hung on her right hip. . . . Of course, after they grew out of school bags, it was 'Thimble, Thimble'—or 'Who's Who'."

"Are you sure of this?" I asked. "Quite sure?"

"As it happens, I am, because I have an old photograph of the two of them walking side by side to school. They wrote their names on it. Facing the camera: the one on the right is labeled 'I'm Rosalie,' and the other one says, 'I'm Valerie.' This, no doubt, was meant to be cute."

"I *must* get this right!" I said. "Be sure, now. Rosalie always walked to Valerie's left. Sometimes these old photographs are in reverse. Think!"

"No need to think. It wasn't in reverse. Valerie's walking on the inside of the sidewalk. Left of Rosalie, again, there's a hydrant. Furthermore, I know the street, in Teddington, Virginia—an old town, it hasn't changed. Mr. Vara, it's easy to make a mistake, and as you say it's really of no importance—"

"Unless, just for the sake of mischief, the twins wrote the wrong names on the photograph?" I suggested.

"Well, even so—what for?"

"Well, frankly, for nothing." I felt slightly foolish. "Your father, I take it, is their brother?"

"Was. He died when I was young. He lost all his money in investments. Daddy was what they call 'the black sheep' of the family. Nobody liked my mother, so they wouldn't talk to any of us. Valerie and Rosalie are like that: they clutch at a chance not to talk to you in case you ask them for anything. They don't want to be put in the position of refusing—which they would be, if you ever asked."

"And they are wealthy, you say?"

"They each have an income of $20,000 a year, and they own jointly a brownstone house on West 73rd Street, and some property in Virginia. But they've never spent a penny more than they absolutely had to, and I am told money piles up. . . . You might ask, of course, why they kept on living together if they couldn't stand each other?"

I said, "Why, no, there is nothing very remarkable about that. Even if they hated each other—which I don't suppose they really do—they need each other, if only to have somebody honest and reliable *not* to be on speaking terms with."

It was at this point that I ought to have kept my big mouth shut, but I was excited. I had a big idea. I said, "Tell me something. Their money—is it income on invested capital, or does it come from some kind of trust fund?"

"Annuities, I think. They provide for each of them during her lifetime."

"Aha! So if one of them dies, that would be the end of her income? I don't know the legal phrases—but is it like that?"

"Yes. And when they both die, that's the end of all the money," said Lucy Lovelace. "Twice a year they go to a lawyer's office downtown to sign something to prove they're still alive, or whatever the purpose is. And so they keep drawing and drawing and drawing. . . ."

"But nothing will revert to you?" I asked.

"Why are you looking like a hawk?" she asked me.

I said, "Because I can tell you something from my own professional observation which may be of immense value to you!"

Now I was really carried away, because I had unarguable clues to play with, out of which I could have made an appearance of miracle-working if I didn't believe that it is better to be intelligent than clairvoyant.

This nice girl made a twiddling movement with her fingers, like getting rid of lint—presumably to draw attention to her hands, which in moments of nervousness she didn't know what to do with—and asked, "Such as?"

"This, and listen carefully: it seems to me that there is no such person as your Aunt Valerie. If there was such a person, she has ceased to exist!"

"I don't understand."

I said, "A proper tailor misses nothing. He must be like a diagnostician who deduces what ails you from which muscles you favor and how you carry yourself and the expression of your face. Well, a tailor learns to read the expression of a hip.

"Listen while I put one and one together for you: two girls grow up together, walk together—undoubtedly in step—with their arms about each other's waist, carrying school bags, one on her left hip and the other on her right. Now in this case, Rosalie will tend to lean right towards her sister, while Valerie will lean to the left in Rosalie's direction. Therefore, when these girls become ladies and are measured for skirts and suits and dresses, it will be noticed that Rosalie's left hip, on which she carried her school bag, is just a trifle higher than her right. And by the same token, Valerie's right hip, will be a hair's-breadth higher than her left.

"Looking at these ladies you would never notice it. A doctor, examining them, would scarcely notice, since it would be a matter of little possible importance to him. Ah, but a tailor or a *jupiere*—a skirt-maker—who knew his business, would find this ever so minute discrepancy all-important! For, don't you see, a skirt is like a moon rocket, or a missile—an infinitesimal error in aim from the launching point results in a wide diversion and a total miss.

"In short, identical in appearance though these twin ladies might appear, they couldn't change skirts without looking lopsided. Draw yourself a little diagram, and see for yourself. The excellent tailors and couturiers who made these ladies' clothes so many years ago compensated subtly for the trivial unbalance of their hips so that their skirts hung perfectly. Hung perfectly *on the hips these skirts were made for!* Then will you kindly tell me exactly why—if your Aunt Valerie was the lady who took to wearing lively check patterns—the lady in check tweeds, whose hems I have to correct, leans to the right and not to the left?"

"And the solid colors—Aunt Rosalie's?"

"Young lady," I said, feeling a thrill like a hunter, "the solid-color dresses and suits *need no adjustment at the hem!*"

"But this is marvelous!" cried Lucy Lovelace, sparkling.

"How so? Why marvelous? Because it tickles your sense of a story? There may be—God forbid!—a petal or two of your 'Rose for Emily' in this old maid's sachet, after all. Because I can positively assure you that if what you have told me is true, *there is only one lady*—the one who walked on her sister's lefthand side. Rosalie."

After a while the girl asked, "Then Rosalie is being both herself and her sister?"

"It must be so," I said. "But do not ask me why."

She said, "You've explained why. I told you they had separate incomes, twenty thousand a year each, and that the real estate was held jointly. It's plain as daylight! Rosalie did away with Valerie, and simply goes on impersonating her. They're identical twins—they were, I mean—and recluses. It couldn't be easier! Twice a year Rosalie dresses up and goes to the lawyer's office and signs Valerie's papers; and then she changes back into her own clothes and goes an hour or two later and signs her own papers. They never go out together—aren't on speaking terms, and haven't been for years and years—so there's nothing remarkable about *that*. So Rosalie draws forty thousand a year instead of twenty!"

It is wonderful how the young make meat and drink out of nightmares! Lucy Lovelace seemed to have put on an inch and three-quarters at the bust, and had a steak and a bottle of wine, she got so much nourishment out of all the horrors implicit in what she was saying.

I said, "Is it absolutely essential that Rosalie *murdered* her sister? Couldn't Valerie simply have died in a natural way?"

"Even so, Rosalie's guilty of something or other. It's illegal not to register a death, or report it, isn't it?"

"I believe it is highly illegal. It is also not very nice to keep the remains even of a close relation in the house for a period of years. . . . And yet the lady seems a perfectly nice old lady. A little close with her money, but that's nothing. Yet . . ." I had a little shudder. "The geometry of the skirt can't lie, and it is sure as Fate that Rosalie is playing a double part."

"We must do something about it at once," Lucy said.

This sobered me.

I said, "Hold hard, my dear young lady, hold hard! Do something, you say. Do what? Write to the lawyers? Call the police? Make a scandal? There is always the chance that all this is perfectly aboveboard."

"It *can't* be. I talked to the lawyer, Mr. Malabar, only a few days ago. Both Valerie and Rosalie had been in his office only a week before —exactly the way you guessed, a matter of one or two hours apart. *Both,* mark you! They signed their papers and the income of *both* goes on being paid. They—"

"Pardon me, it was you who did this guessing, Miss Lovelace, not I."

"It doesn't matter. What I said makes sense. It was you who worked it out, and I think you're marvelously quick-witted and astute. You made the matter so clear that I could read it for myself—and that's cleverer than Sherlock Holmes or that little Belgian detective with the gray cells. We have to do *something.*"

Not ungratified, I was still a little uneasy. I had opened my mouth and put my foot in it.

I said, "Why not ask this Mr. Malabar, the lawyer? Is he your lawyer too?"

"Not really. He's a sort of Executor. Mother and I get three hundred and seventy-six dollars a month, which is all there is left of Daddy's estate. Mr. Malabar 'administers,' or whatever it's called."

"One thing, child," I said. "Do you stand to gain anything by doing something about all this? Your natural love of a good story aside, will you get anything material?"

She blushed—that is, she turned a shade more pearly—and made as much scorn as she could express with the half inch or so of upper lip at her disposal, and said, "I don't think so. I haven't considered the matter. If you think I'm scheming to get money, you're wrong, quite wrong. There's the house on 73rd Street, and the place in Virginia, I suppose, and I imagine Valerie and Rosalie must have saved up hundreds of thousands—though I don't know and don't care—but they aren't likely to leave my mother anything, or me either.

"No," she went on, "this is a matter of principle. They had no right to despise Daddy just because he lost his money. I'd rather lose money than gain it the way they do, anyway. And who cares about money? And they had no right to disapprove of Mummy. Who do they think they are to 'disapprove,' for goodness' sake, of anybody? I'm going to air the matter, that's all."

"Be careful which windows you throw open when something's smoldering, or you can get burned," I warned her. "Watch the wind. Revenge—"

"I don't care a hoot about revenge. Who said anything about revenge? I want to ask them who they think they are to disapprove of my mother. And if there has been a crime committed, it is your duty as a citizen—"

"What's this?" I said. "Duty as a citizen? I know my duty as a citizen. If I see two armed gangs at war, it is my duty to arrest them, et cetera, et cetera. Don't tell me, if you please, my duty as a citizen—I still carry an umbrella scar on my shoulder from when I last did my duty as a citizen by trying to stop a man from beating his wife. It was the wife who hit me and the man who saved me. My duty does not involve me in *A Rose for Emily,* thank you. I am a cloak-and-suiter, not a cloak-and-dagger."

"I think you are a genius," said Lucy Lovelace.

And so, what with one thing and another, I finally said to her, "Look here. I have two suits and two dresses to deliver to your aunt. Whatever happens to me now, I deserve it. I said the job would be done the day after tomorrow. Actually, I can get it done tonight. I deliver to the door of the brownstone on West 73rd. You may carry the parcels. I have, as you might say, the *entree;* the finished job is my passport, and the very moderate bill is my visa.

"Carry the lot, young lady, carry the whole lot—I appoint you my apprentice for the time being, reserving the right to run away if I think fit. It is your family, and not mine. At the best I am an interloper. . . . I chatter as it might seem humorously, my dear, but there are queer patterns here which I seem to have talked myself into. So let it be for the fun of the game. Be here at five."

"You *are* sweet."

A sickening term of endearment, but better than nothing. . . .

On our way to the Lovelace brownstone on West 73rd Street I said to Lucy Lovelace, "Be silent, remember. To the ignorant much is told. Use your eyes and your memory. Above all, use your ears, your nose—all your senses—and keep your wits about you." To be candid, I was a little nervous. "Best say nothing, nothing at all. Not one word."

"I haven't anything to say," she said. She, too, was far from being at her ease.

I had prepared a smooth line of

introduction: I had neuritis and could not carry parcels; there was a certain something about the line of one skirt which dissatisfied me—that kind of thing.

There were no servants. Miss Rosalie opened the door and let us into a suffocated little drawing room connected with another room by an arched door which had been painted, once upon a time, apple-green and gold. There was an Aubusson carpet and gilt furniture and porcelain figurines and other bibelots in dusty cabinets. Over a marble fireplace hung a picture by Poussin, or somebody like him. Drapes of heavy velours, champagne-colored more or less.

"Well?" said Miss Rosalie. "You want some money, I suppose?"

She was speaking to me. But Lucy, despite all my warnings, answered in a high, trembling voice. "We don't want your dirty money, you wicked woman! What have you done with Aunt Valerie, you murderess?"

She had dug her fingers into my arm so that I could not run away. One of those instants passed which contains eternities. Then the arched door bumped open and an old lady who looked wonderfully like Miss Rosalie came in, wheeling herself in an invalid chair, and asked, "Did somebody call me?"

Now Lucy wanted to run, but it was my turn to hold on; and I am tolerably strong in the fingers.

Rosalie said, "Don't excite yourself, Val honey—everybody's gone stark, raving mad, I think."

Vara the Tailor sighed and said, "There was nothing even mildly illegal, or even unreasonable. The quarrel between the twins had long been patched up. Valerie had a rheumatic affliction. It was agreed that it would be absurd to waste all her fine clothes, so Rosalie wore them.

"They detested lawyers, legal formalities, powers of attorney, and anything smacking of what they called 'prying into our private affairs.' So Rosalie signed Valerie's papers with her sister's full consent. Their signatures were sufficiently alike to pass the scrutiny of the lawyer who had known them both for forty years and took both of them for granted.

"And it appeared that their so-called 'renunciation' of Lucy and mother was nothing of the kind. They neither liked them nor disliked them, but felt that it was not for the Lovelace Twins to make the first move towards friendly relations. There was a little something of strain at first; but when the 'Rose for Emily' story came out, and it was indicated that one of the twins might have poisoned the other and then impersonated her, the old ladies stared at each other open-mouthed.

"A funny thing happened, then. Simultaneously, and in the same voice, Rosalie and Valerie said, 'Well, why didn't *I* think of that forty-four years ago?' At this, they both burst out laughing.

"Lucy burst out crying. And I burst out of the house."

Vara gave me back my trousers. I asked, "How did it all end?"

"The old ladies made Lucy their companion and heir, for they had a lot of money put by, and they all went to Virginia, Lucy's mother and all. There, presumably, my romantic young friend is writing The Great American Novel."

"What's that?" I asked.

Vara said, "I don't know. Russia probably claims to have invented it. But it all demonstrates that truth is stranger than fiction."

"How, in this instance, was truth stranger than fiction?"

"In that I fell for the fiction—I who am old enough to know better," said Vara.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDBOUNDS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Aiken, Joan	THE FORTUNE HUNTERS	Doubleday & Co.	$3.50	2/12
Craig, Dennis: Gosling, John	THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY	Bobbs-Merrill Co.	$3.95	Feb.
Creasey, John	THE TOFF AND THE STOLEN TRESSES	Walker & Company	$3.50	2/10
Fish, Robert L.	THE DIAMOND BUBBLE	Simon & Schuster	$3.50	2/12
Gardner, Erle Stanley	THE CASE OF THE TROUBLED TRUSTEE	Morrow	$3.50	2/7
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Pearson, Edmund	MURDER AT SMUTTY NOSE: And Other Murders	Dolphin Books	$ .95	3/19
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***"Bon avocat, mauvais voisin"* ("*Good lawyer, bad neighbor*").**
— OLD FRENCH MAXIM

"The toils of law . . . lengthen simple justice into trade."
— Thomson, THE SEASONS

SIMPLE JUSTICE

by CHARLES NORMAN

SPRING DREW HENRI REYNARD into the woods. True, there was nowhere else to go; the main street suddenly went into the woods at either end of the town—just like that. Unfortunately for him, they were M. Bougereau's woods. Their enmity was of long standing, a fact of life. Whenever the two men met, they pretended not to see each other, when actually they were glowering. M. Bougereau could glower more frighteningly.

Still, a man must breathe sometime, a man must contemplate; and M. Reynard had set out on his walk, hardly knowing where he was going—and found himself in the woods. The air was sweet, birds were chirping all around him, and the oak trees made something new of light, shade, and sound. Like rain, he thought, or a brook flashing over smooth stones—stones made of pure sunshine.

Pausing to listen to a bird which seemed to share his feelings about spring, M. Reynard noticed, almost at his feet, a flower he had never seen before. It was about a foot high, with broad, green, jagged leaves below and curly, sticky, reddish blossoms on top. There was something truly springlike about it—as of something being born in full view; and in an instant he had taken out his pocketknife and cut it as close to the ground as he could manage. The stem was stiff and had the feel of wood.

One flower is not a bouquet, so he looked around for more of the same. He was surprised to see a great many, all spaced well apart. He cut half a dozen, and turned homeward. M. Reynard was a sentimental man. Although he had been married a long time, he still liked to surprise his wife in this way, and indeed he even liked the scoffing tone she used when she accepted his little gifts. It was, after all, good-natured—which is what mattered.

M. Reynard went through the usual bantering scene with his wife, and was pleased to see his bouquet put into a blue ironware pitcher which his mother had also used for flowers. His wife knew how to please him. His wife, in deference to her husband's position, never spoke to M. Bougereau; but Madame Bougereau had been her friend, and it pleased her that Henri did not object when his enemy's wife dropped in for a chat. Madame Bougereau dropped in, noticed the pitcher and its unusual bouquet, and laughed.

"But they're not flowers at all!" Madame Bougereau cried out. "They're young oaks!"

"All the same," said Madame Reynard, "they're very pretty."

Now, it was not malicious on Madame Bougereau's part when she told her husband about it. To her, it was simply a good joke on Reynard, who was a city man. But her husband did not think it funny at all. He glowered. Then his face took on one of those grim expressions she disliked so much, and feared. She was deeply pained when she learned he was bringing suit against M. Reynard for trespassing and cutting valuable timber on his land.

The affair could not be kept a secret, and soon the whole town was agog. The older townspeople shook their heads. "That Bougereau," they said; "there's no getting away from him." Secretly, they admired his pertinacity. Madame Bougereau, meanwhile, stopped calling on Madame Reynard. It was not her inclination; but with a husband like hers, she deemed it more politic. Madame Reynard agreed.

The magistrate who heard the suit took a stern view. After all—and he went into a torrent of erudition: the oak had been sacred to Jove himself; mythology and folklore were full of oaks; acorns had been the food of gods and men, though now they were only the food of pigs; still, men ate pigs, so *voila!* It was a most valuable tree: the bark was used for tanning leather, for ink, used even in medicines. As for the timber—ships had been built with it, mills were built with it, furniture was built with it. What durability! What a grain! It improved with the years. Speaking of years, in seventy years an oak might reach a hundred feet, with a girth of thirty feet, and a full crop of acorns—enough to feed several herds of swine. As for the board feet of timber—

At this point M. Reynard interrupted. His lawyer looked pained.

"Lightning might have struck it before then, Your Honor," declared poor Reynard. "Think of all the storms there would have been in this region in twenty years, not to mention seventy!"

The magistrate adjusted his spectacles. It was apparent that his forthcoming remark would be devastating. It was.

"M. Reynard," he said, speaking gravely. "We are not here to discuss an act of God, but an act of man."

He awarded damages in the sum of 25,000 francs to M. Bougereau.

M. Reynard, already a contemplative man, became a brooding one.

He brooded over the unjust penalty meted out to him for his innocent walk, his innocent wish to please his wife. And then an idea struck him. He hurried to the house of his lawyer.

His lawyer, M. Prevost, listened, then exclaimed rapturously: "It is correct—it is *formidable!*"

The next day, on behalf of his client, M. Prevost brought suit against M. Bougereau.

The town was astonished. M. Reynard was demanding compensation for the labor of cutting M. Bougereau's timber, the value of which was no longer in dispute. Furthermore, he would pay M. Bougereau only when he, M. Reynard, had been paid for that labor, which had come first.

M. Bougereau was loud in his denunciation of M. Reynard. Ah, he was clever, no doubt; but he, M. Bougereau, could see through him. His lawyer listened respectfully and voiced his admiration. M. Reynard, declared M. Bougereau, had no business on his land. And if he performed any labors there, it was too bad, you understand. Had anyone given him permission? Certainly no one with authority. If this sort of thing continued, no man's property was safe.

How right he was, said Bougereau's lawyer, M. Trier, and brought forth a bottle of wine to share with M. Prevost. He and M. Prevost were old antagonists—but only in the courtroom. Outside the courtroom they laughed over the suits and countersuits that came their way. Legal actions were for the weak-minded—with money.

Attended by their lawyers, the two litigants appeared once more before the magistrate, M. Lorraine, who listened patiently to both sides, and occasionally asked a question. It was noticeably warmer in the courtroom this time, but nobody breathed as the magistrate prepared to render judgment.

M. Lorraine reviewed the case. There was much to be said on both sides. He said it, with many embellishments.

"The laborer," he concluded, drawing on his great store of knowledge, Christian as well as pagan, "the laborer is worthy of his hire."

"But I did not hire him, Your Honor!" M. Bougereau shouted.

M. Trier, who could not have expressed it better himself, remained silent.

"Nevertheless," said M. Lorraine, "M. Reynard did do the work. For if he had not cut down the timber, no estimate as to its value would have been placed on it. And since a value has been placed on it, then a commensurate value must be set on the work. Eh, *alors*, what would you?"

He shrugged and awarded M. Reynard 15,000 francs.

"After all," said the magistrate,

"the timber is as yet unprocessed, but there can be no question that the plaintiff's labor was complete."

M. Reynard shook hands with M. Prevost, while M. Trier threw up his hands in well simulated despair. M. Bougereau glowered, but not at the magistrate.

"Pooh," said his wife, when she learned of the newest development. "You men never know how to end anything satisfactorily."

It was now M. Bougereau's turn to brood. His avarice was stronger than his indignation, though the latter showed more. He considered. Before M. Reynard would pay him, he would have to pay M. Reynard. He could never bring himself to do that. What remained?

M. Trier was expecting him. As a matter of fact, the bottle which he had shared with M. Prevost still stood on his desk. M. Bougereau sat down and mopped his brow with an enormous red handkerchief. He was obviously under a great strain. M. Trier took charge.

"Here, my friend," he said to M. Bougereau. "Have a glass of wine. Things are never so bad as they seem."

He poured.

"Yes?" said M. Bougereau hopefully. "And then?"

"Why, this," said M. Trier. "Exchanges of cash are always delicate matters, fraught with difficulties. One has to draw it, to deliver it; accidents may happen. One can never tell. It is better to be sure."

"So?"

"So," continued M. Trier, "we make this simple proposition. We draw up a paper conveying the cut timber to M. Reynard. After all, he has it, anyway—ha, ha, ha." M. Bougereau looked at him in astonishment. "Ah, my friend, you'll pardon me," M. Trier went on, "but this case has its funny aspects. Is it not so? There, I thought you would see it."

M. Bougereau was laughing—in relief. M. Trier joined him. The two men laughed until they were red in the face.

"As I said," resumed M. Trier, "nothing is so bad as it seems, while there is a good attorney to advise one, eh?"

"I agree," said M. Bougereau.

"Very well," said M. Trier, getting back to business. "We convey the timber to M. Reynard as full compensation for his labor of cutting it down. I hand the paper to his attorney, M. Prevost, who will get his client to sign it. The advice, Monsieur, of an attorney is not to be regarded lightly—M. Reynard will agree. There—it's over. Like that."

M. Bougereau touched glasses with M. Trier, gulped down his wine, and then began to splutter. M. Trier looked at him in astonishment.

"But what about the ten thousand francs that remain?" M. Bougereau asked. "After all, we have a judgment."

"First things first," said M. Trier.

"Very well," agreed M. Bougereau. "First things first."

And he went home. He told his wife about it.

"Ah," she said, "I am glad to see there's some sense left."

As soon as the door closed behind M. Bougereau, M. Trier drew from his desk drawer the document which he and M. Prevost had already executed. He took it around to M. Prevost's office. It was now the latter's turn to take out a bottle of wine.

They drank. M. Trier was the first to speak.

"There is still," he said, "the matter of the remaining ten thousand francs."

"Not so fast, my friend," said M. Prevost. "Not so fast." And he put the document in his desk drawer. "My client owns the timber. Very good. Now he must sell it. Who knows what the market is for oak? So, you see, there will be time enough to discuss payment."

The two old courtroom antagonists looked at each other and burst into laughter.

"First things first," M. Trier repeated in a choking voice.

"Second things second," said M. Prevost.

And third things third, thought M. Trier as he returned to his office to compute his bill. At the same time M. Prevost was computing his bill.

"All the same," M. Trier said to himself, "it was a gallant gesture on the part of M. Reynard to bring his wife a bouquet."

How Hercule Poirot's little gray cells earned him 14,000 shares of stock in Burma Mines, Ltd. . . .

POIROT MAKES AN INVESTMENT

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

I LAID DOWN MY BANKBOOK WITH A sigh.

"It is a curious thing," I observed, "but my overdraft never seems to grow any less."

"And it perturbs you not? Me, if I had an overdraft, never should I close my eyes all night," declared Poirot.

"You deal in comfortable balances, I suppose," I retorted.

"Four hundred and forty-four pounds, four and fourpence," said Poirot with some complacency. "A neat figure, is it not?"

"It must be tact on the part of your bank manager. He is evidently acquainted with your passion for symmetrical details. What about investing, say three hundred of it, in oilfields? The prospectus, which is advertised in the papers today, says they will pay one hundred per cent in dividends next year."

"Not for me," said Poirot, shaking his head. "I like not the sensational. For me the safe, the prudent investment—*les rentes,* the consols, the—how do you call it?—the conversion."

"Have you never made a speculative investment?"

"No, *mon ami,*" replied Poirot severely. "I have not. And the only shares I own which have not what you call the gilded-edge are fourteen thousand shares in the Burma Mines, Ltd."

Poirot paused with an air of waiting to be encouraged to go on.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"And for them I paid no cash—no, they were the reward of the exercise of my little gray cells. You would like to hear the story?"

"Of course I would."

"These mines are situated in the interior of Burma about two hundred miles inland from Rangoon. They were discovered by the Chinese in the Fifteenth Century and worked down to the time of the Mohammedan Rebellion, being finally abandoned in the year 1868. The Chinese extracted the rich lead-silver ore, smelting it for the silver alone, and leaving large quantities of rich lead-bearing slag. This, of course, was soon discovered when prospecting work was carried out in Burma, but owing to the fact that

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the old workings had become full of loose filling and water, all attempts to find the source of the ore proved fruitless. Many parties were sent out by syndicates, and they dug over a large area, but this rich prize still eluded them. But a representative of one of the syndicates got on the track of a Chinese family who were supposed to have kept a record of the mine's location. The present head of the family was one Wu Ling."

"What a fascinating page of commercial romance!" I exclaimed.

"Is it not? Ah, *mon ami,* one can have romance without golden-haired girls of matchless beauty—no, I am wrong; it is auburn hair that so excites you always. You remember—"

"Go on with the story," I said hastily.

"Eh bien, my friend, this Wu Ling was approached. He was an estimable merchant, much respected in the province where he lived. He admitted at once that he owned the documents in question, and was perfectly prepared to negotiate for the sale, but he objected to dealing with any other than principals. Finally it was arranged that he should journey to England and meet the directors of an important company.

"Wu Ling made the journey to England in the S.S. *Assunta,* and the *Assunta* duly docked at Southampton on a cold, foggy morning in November. One of the directors, Mr. Pearson, went down to Southampton to meet the boat, but owing to the fog, the train down was very much delayed, and by the time he arrived, Wu Ling had disembarked and left by special train for London.

Mr. Pearson returned to town somewhat annoyed, as he had no idea where the Chinese proposed to stay. Later in the day, however. the offices of the Company were rung up on the telephone; Wu Ling was staying at the Russell Hotel. He was feeling somewhat unwell after the voyage, but declared himself perfectly able to attend the Board meeting on the following day.

"The meeting of the Board took place at eleven o'clock. When half-past eleven came, and Wu Ling had not put in an appearance, the secretary rang up the Russell Hotel. In answer to his inquiries, he was told that the Chinese had gone out with a friend about half-past ten. It seemed clear that he had started out with the intention of coming to the meeting, but the morning wore away, and he did not appear. It was, of course, possible that he had lost his way, being unacquainted with London, but at a late hour that night, he had not returned to the hotel.

"Thoroughly alarmed now, Mr. Pearson put matters in the hands of the police. On the following day there was still no trace of the missing man, but towards evening of the day after that, a body was found in the Thames which proved to be that of the ill-fated Chinese. Neither on the body, nor in the luggage at the hotel, was there any trace of the papers relating to the mine.

"At this juncture, *mon ami,* I was brought into the affair. Mr. Pearson called on me. While profoundly shocked by the death of the Chinese, his chief anxiety was to recover the papers which were the object of Wu Ling's visit to England. The main anxiety of the police, of course, would be to track down the murderer—the recovery of the papers would be a secondary consideration. What he wanted me to do was to cooperate with the police while acting in the interests of the Company.

"I consented readily enough. It was clear that there were two fields of search open to me. On the one hand, I might look among the employees of the Company who knew of Wu Ling's coming; on the other, among the passengers on the boat who might have been acquainted with his mission. I started with the second, as being a narrower field of search. In this I coincided with Inspector Miller, who was in charge of the case—a man altogether different from our friend Japp—conceited, ill-mannered and quite insufferable.

"Together we interviewed the officers of the ship. They had little to tell us. Wu Ling had kept much to himself on the voyage. He had been intimate with but two of the other passengers—one a broken-down European named Dyer who appeared to bear a somewhat unsavory reputation, the other a young bank clerk named Charles Lester, who was returning from Hong Kong. We were lucky enough to obtain snapshots of both these men. At the moment there seemed little doubt that if either of the two was implicated, Dyer was the man. He was known to be mixed up with a gang of Chinese crooks, and was altogether a most likely suspect.

"Our next step was to visit the Russell Hotel. Shown a snapshot of Wu Ling, they recognized him at once. We then showed them the snapshot of Dyer, but to our disappointment the hall porter declared positively that was not the man who had come to the hotel on the fatal morning. Almost as an afterthought, I produced the photograph of Lester, and to my surprise the man at once recognized it.

" 'Yes, sir,' he asserted, 'that's the gentleman who came in at half-past ten and asked for Mr. Wu Ling, and afterwards went out with him.'

"The affair was progressing. Our next move was to interview Charles Lester. He met us with the utmost frankness, was desolated to hear of Wu Ling's untimely death, and put himself at our disposal in every way. His story was as follows: by arrangement with Wu Ling, he called for him at the hotel at ten thirty. Wu Ling, however, did not appear. Instead, his servant came, explained that his master had had to go out, and offered to conduct the young man to where his master now was.

"Suspecting nothing, Lester agreed, and the Chinese procured a taxi. They drove for some time in the direction of the docks. Suddenly becoming mistrustful, Lester stopped the taxi and got out, disregarding the servant's protests. That, he assured us, was all he knew.

"Apparently satisfied, we thanked him and took our leave. His story was soon proved to be somewhat inaccurate. To begin with, Wu Ling had had no servant with him, either on the boat or at the hotel. In the second place, the taxi driver who had driven the two men that morning came forward. Far from Lester's having left the taxi en route, he and the Chinese had driven to a certain unsavory dwelling in Limehouse, right in the heart of Chinatown. The place in question was more or less well-known as an opium-den of the lowest description.

"The two men had gone in and about an hour later the English gentleman, whom he identified from the photograph, came out alone. He looked very pale and ill, and directed the taximan to take him to the nearest underground station.

"Inquiries were made about Charles Lester's standing, and it was found that, though bearing an excellent character, he was heavily in debt, and had a secret passion for gambling. Dyer, of course, was not lost sight of. It seemed just faintly possible that he might have impersonated the other man, but that idea was proved utterly groundless. His alibi for the whole day in question was absolutely unimpeachable.

"Of course, the proprietor of the opium den denied everything with Oriental stolidity. He had never seen Wu Ling; he had never seen Charles Lester. No two gentlemen had been to the place that morning. In any case, the police were wrong: no opium was ever smoked there.

"His denials, however well meant, did little to help Charles Lester. He was arrested for the murder of Wu Ling. A search of his effects was made, but no papers relating to the mine were discovered. The proprietor of the opium den was also taken into custody, but a cursory raid of his premises yielded nothing. Not even a stick of opium rewarded the zeal of the police.

"In the meantime my friend, Mr. Pearson was in a great state of agitation. He strode up and down my room, uttering great lamentations.

" 'But you must have some ideas, M. Poirot!' he kept urging.

" 'Certainly I have ideas,' I replied cautiously. 'That is the trouble—one has too many; therefore they all lead in different directions.'

" 'For instance?' he suggested.

" 'For instance—the taxi driver. We have only his word for it that he drove the two men to that house. Then—was it really that house they went to? Supposing they left the taxi there, passed through the house and out by another entrance and went elsewhere?'

"Mr. Pearson seemed struck by that.

"'But you do nothing but sit and think? Can't we *do* something?'

"'Monsieur,' I said with dignity, 'it is not for Hercule Poirot to run up and down the evil-smelling streets of Limehouse like a little dog of no breeding. Be calm. My agents are at work.'

"On the following day I had news for him. The two men had indeed passed through the house in question, but their real objective was a small eating-house close to the river. They were seen to go in there, and Lester to come out alone.

"And then—figure to yourself, Hastings—an idea of the most unreasonable seized this Mr. Pearson! Nothing would suit him but that we should go ourselves to this eating house and make investigations. I argued, but he would not listen. He talked of disguising himself—he even suggested that I—*I* should—I hesitate to say it—should shave off my mustache! Yes, *rien que ça!* I pointed out to him that that was an idea ridiculous and absurd. One destroys not a thing of beauty wantonly. Besides, shall not a Belgian gentleman with a mustache desire to see life and smoke the opium just as readily as one without a mustache?

"*Eh bien,* he gave in on that, but he still insisted on his project. He turned up that evening—*mon Dieu,* what a figure! He wore what he called the pea jacket, and his chin was dirty and unshaved; he had a scarf of the vilest that offended the nose. And figure to yourself, he was enjoying himself! Truly, the English are mad! He made some changes in my own appearance. I permitted it. Can one argue with a maniac? We started out—after all, could I let him go alone, a child dressed up to act the charades?"

"Of course you couldn't," I replied.

"To continue—we arrived. Mr. Pearson talked English of the strangest. He represented himself to be a man of the sea. He talked of lubbers and focselles and I know not what. It was a low little room with many Chinese in it. We ate of peculiar dishes. *Ah, Dieu, mon estomac!"* Poirot clasped that portion of his anatomy tenderly before continuing. "Then there came to us the proprietor, a Chinese with a face of evil smiles.

"'You gentlemen no likee food here,' he said. 'You come for what you likee better. Piecee pipe, eh?'

"Mr. Peason gave me the great kick under the table. And he said, 'I don't mind if I do, John. Lead on.'

"The Chinese smiled and took us through a door and to a cellar and through a trapdoor, and down some steps and up again into a room all full of divans and cushions of the most comfortable. We lay down and a Chinese boy took off our boots. It was the best moment of the evening. Then they brought us the opium pipes and cooked the opium pills, and we pretended to smoke and then to sleep and dream. But when we were alone, Mr. Pearson called softly to me, and immediately he began crawling along the floor. We went into other rooms where other people were asleep, until we heard two men talking. We stayed behind a curtain and listened. They were speaking of Wu Ling.

"'What about the papers?' said one.

"'Mr. Lester, he takee those,' answered the other, who was a Chinese. 'He say, puttee them allee in safee place—where pleeceman no lookee.'

"'Ah, but he's arrested,' said the first one.

"'He gettee free. Pleeceman not sure he done it.'

"There was more of the same, then apparently the two men were coming our way, and we scuttled back to our beds.

"'We'd better get out of here,' said Pearson, after a few minutes had elapsed. 'This place isn't healthy.'

"'You are right, monsieur,' I agreed. 'We have played the farce long enough.'

"We succeeded in getting away, all right, paying handsomely for our smoke. Once clear of Limehouse, Peason drew a long breath.

"'I'm glad to get out of that,' he said. 'But we've learned something.'

"'We have indeed,' I agreed. 'And I fancy that we shall not have much difficulty in finding what we want—after this evening's masquerade.'

"And there was no difficulty whatsoever," finished Poirot suddenly.

This abrupt ending seemed so extraordinary that I stared at him.

"But—but where were they?" I asked.

"In his pocket—*tout simplement.*"

"In *whose* pocket?"

"Mr. Pearson's, of course." Then, observing my look of bewilderment, he continued gently. "You do not yet see it? Mr. Peason, like Charles Lester, was in debt. Mr. Pearson, like Charles Lester, was fond of gambling. And he conceived the idea of stealing the papers from Wu Ling. He met him all right at Southampton, came up to London with him, and took him straight to Limehouse. It was foggy that day; the Chinese would not notice where he was going

"I fancy Mr. Pearson smoked the opium fairly often down there and had some peculiar friends in consequence. I do not think he meant murder. His idea was that one of the Chinese should impersonate Wu Ling and receive the money for the sale of the document. So far, so good!

"But to the Oriental mind it was infinitely simpler to kill Wu Ling and throw his body into the river, and Pearson's Chinese accomplices followed their own methods without consulting him. Imagine, then, what you would call the 'funk *bleu*' of Mr. Pearson. Someone may have seen him in the train with Wu Ling—murder is a very different thing from simple theft.

"His salvation lies with the Chinese who is impersonating Wu Ling at the Russell Hotel. If only the body is not discovered too soon! Probably Wu Ling had told Pearson of the arrangement between him and Charles Lester whereby the latter was to call for him at the hotel. Pearson sees there an excellent way of diverting suspicion from himself. Charles Lester shall be the last person to be seen in company with Wu Ling.

"So the impersonator has orders to represent himself to Lester as the servant of Wu Ling, and to bring him as speedily as possible to Limehouse. There, very likely, he was offered a drink. The drink would be suitably drugged, and when Lester emerged an hour later, he would have a very hazy impression of what had happened. So much was the case that as soon as Lester learned of Wu Ling's death, he loses his nerve, and denies that he ever reached Limehouse.

"By that, of course, he plays right into Pearson's hands. But is Pearson content? No—my manner disquiets him, and he determines to complete the case against Lester. So he arranges an elaborate masquerade. Me, I am to be gulled completely. Did I not say just now that he was a child acting the charades?

"*Eh bien,* I play my part. He goes home rejoicing. But in the morning Inspector Miller arrives on his doorstep. The papers are found on him; the game is up. Bitterly he regrets permitting himself to play the farce with Hercule Poirot! There was only one real difficulty in the affair."

"What was that?" I demanded curiously.

"Convincing Inspector Miller! What an animal, that! Both obstinate and imbecile. And in the end he took all the credit!"

"Too bad," I said.

"Ah, well, I had my compensations. The other directors of the Burma Mines, Ltd., awarded me fourteen thousand shares as a small recompense for my services. Not so bad, eh? But when investing money, keep, I beg of you, Hastings, strictly to the conservative. The things you read in the paper, they may not be true. The directors of the oil fields—they may be so many Mr. Pearsons!"

◆

Great Uncle Zeb was an old, old man, but he'd led a full and adventurous life. When he came to stay with the Cantrells, he came as a kind of living legend, and when he told 12-year-old Webbford and 8-year-old George tales of his past—of his exploits as a soldier in the Civil War, of his feats as a scout in the old Wild West, of his epic deeds as an Indian fighter—the two boys sat enthralled and speechless; and when the old man showed them the mementos and trophies in his brassbound trunk . . . Another terribly moving story by the very talented author of "Tales from Home" (EQMM, issue of April 1963)—indeed, another memorable "tale from home" . . .

INDIAN SUMMER

by L. E. BEHNEY

I REMEMBER THE DAY I FIRST HEARD about Uncle Zebulon like it was still yesterday. I was twelve that summer and George was eight and Emma must have been about fifteen.

It was late June and hot. We were eating on the screened front porch with the sparrows scolding in the wisteria vine and bees humming around the honeysuckle and the smell of sun thick in the still air.

George had run out to the road and brought in the mail and Pa was looking through it and eating at the same time, as he usually did ever since I could remember. George and I were being silly about something or other and Aunt Kate—she's Pa's sister—was scolding us and Emma was finishing her second plate of food and looking sleepy when Pa put down his fork and held out a letter he had just opened.

"Look at this, Kate," he said. "Uncle Zeb's coming out here to stay with us."

Aunt Kate stopped what she was saying to George and me and stared at him with her mouth open. She snatched the letter. Her face went splotchy white as her little black eyes jumped back and forth across the writing which was in pencil on lined tablet paper.

"Oh, no, they're not!" she said, clamping her lips shut like a trap. "They're not going to unload that horrid, sinful old man on us! Let him go to the poor farm. He isn't coming here!"

Pa sighed. "Now, Kate," he said. "It isn't going to hurt us to take him in. We've got plenty of room."

"I wouldn't have a place for him

in my house if I had one hundred rooms, Ansel, and you know why. He's a dirty, immoral, ungodly old tramp! Now you just send a telegram to Jonathan and Callie. They've had him off and on for twenty years and they can just keep him!"

George and I were staring open-mouthed. Emma—she's Aunt Kate's daughter—ate placidly through a piece of apricot pie, her big blue eyes half closed like a sick calf's.

Aunt Kate's big hands crumpled the letter. The skin of her heavy arms was brown and flecked with huge freckles.

"I can't tell them that," Pa said. "Now be reasonable, Kate. All that happened a long time ago. He's an old man, nearly eighty, maybe more. Callie's took sick; they've got to sell the farm and move to town, and they've got no place for Uncle Zeb."

"More place than we've got!" Aunt Kate said. "Think of his influence on your own boys, Webb and poor little George, if you haven't the decency to consider my Emma, and me your own sister that'll have to slave and cook and clean after him and endure his filthy ways."

"Now, Kate—"

"He's actually killed—*murdered*—human beings and not a word of repentance—"

"It was wartime."

"And I suppose that makes it all right? The good book says thou shalt not kill. It doesn't say that sometimes it's not a sin to take a life. You're willing to take him into your house knowing how sneaky clever he is at luring the innocent to their destruction? You're welcoming the devil himself into your house!"

"Kate!" Pa shouted. Aunt Kate was always talking fancy like that, and Pa often as not got angry as a hornet. His face was getting red as he slammed his fist on the table. "Jonathan and you and me are the only kin Uncle Zeb's got. He ain't going to any poor farm! The Cantrells ain't sunk so low they can't take care of their own! He's an old, old man, I tell you. And he's not going to some place where they'll shut him up. It'd be the same as putting him in jail."

"That's where he belongs," Aunt Kate muttered. She swept out to the kitchen with her chin up and her eyes flashing. Emma got up and languidly followed her Ma.

Pa pushed his plate back and sat frowning. George chattered and hopped with excitement. "Who's Uncle Zeb, Pa? Why's Aunt Kate so mad? Don't she like him?"

"He's your Great Uncle," Pa said, looking at us hard, "your Grandfather Cantrell's brother. He fought in the Civil War and he was a scout during the Indian wars. He's a fine old man, a good old man, don't let your Aunt's nonsense make you think different. No, I guess I shouldn't put it that way—she means well enough, but it's just that she and Uncle Zeb never got on. She's a good God-fearing woman and she sees things her way, that's all."

"Is Uncle Zeb coming to live with us?" George asked.

"Yes, I guess so." Pa looked grim and bothered. "For a while anyway."

"When's he coming?" I asked.

"Sunday," Pa said. "He'll be in Melford on the three o'clock train."

The letter had come on Wednesday. On Sunday afternoon Pa and George and I went to Melford to meet the train. We had the old Chevrolet polished up so you could see your face in its shiny black paint.

It was a blazing hot day and as we jolted along, the faint breeze we stirred up seemed hotter than ever. I remember the smell of the car seats and the feel of the hot leather on the backs of my legs and the way the hayfields and vineyards scented the air.

The roads were unpaved in those days until you got almost all the way to town, and the dust streamed up behind us like the pillar of cloud that God provided Moses to lead him to the promised land. I remember thinking that and wondering if I would be eternally damned for thinking such a blasphemous thought. Especially on Sunday.

Pa was still dressed in his best suit he had worn to church that morning. Aunt Kate had insisted on it, more to plague Pa, I think, than to impress Uncle Zeb with our pious gentility; and sweat ran in rivulets down his freshly shaved chin and dripped on his stiff celluloid collar.

We bumped across the tracks and pulled into the depot yard, naked of grass, baked hard as a yellowish pavement, and blindingly bright in the sunlight. Pa shut off the motor. Melford lay wrapped in its Sunday calm—a broad asphalt-paved street of brick and frame false fronts with a stuccoed two-storied hotel. There wasn't a car except ours in sight—not even a team of horses.

Pa looked at his watch. "We might as well get inside out of the sun," he said.

It wasn't much cooler in the Waiting Room with its fly-specked yellow ceilings and walls, its grimy floor, its sickly brown, curly-armed benches, and its brass spittoons. In the middle of the ceiling a rusty, four-bladed fan turned slowly making a rheumy squeak.

George started sliding down the bench arms giggling to himself. Pa went to the little office where the stationmaster slept with his feet on his desk.

"Three o'clock?" the man said, yawning. " 'Bout half an hour late."

At last the train came into sight—a smudge where the shimmering tracks vanished in a glittering mirage; and then we saw a tower of belching black smoke with a puff of white steam that had vanished by the time the excited shriek of the whistle reached us; and then the engine and the cars were thundering past as if the whole train would pass us heedlessly by; and finally we heard the grind of the brakes and the passenger car was deposited neatly beside the station.

A door opened and a little old man got off. He was carrying an old wornout valise and he was wrinkled and stooped and whiteheaded and he wasn't what I'd expected at all. I looked to see if anyone else had gotten off, but no one had.

The door closed, the train rumbled all the way from the locomotive to the caboose, black smoke puffed, and the wheels began to move, faster and faster, until the back end was only a shimmering speck far down the tracks.

I looked again at the old man. Naturally, since such frivolous pastimes were forbidden to me, I had read every lurid Dime Novel I could get hold of, and Uncle Zebulon didn't fit the part of daredevil soldier and wilderness scout at all. He was too little, too stooped and frail, too wrinkled, too whiteheaded and old; but his eyes, when he looked at me, were clear and blue as mountain pools and remarkably keen and direct.

He wore a suit that had once been white but was now wrinkled and threadbare. He had a ragged little mustache and jutting chin whiskers that were much stained with tobacco juice, and he wore a dusty black felt hat.

"Uncle Zeb," Pa said loudly, "I'm sure glad to see you!" He put his arm around the old man and turned to us. "These are my sons, Webbford and George."

We said hello politely but without enthusiasm. George was looking up at the old man with a disappointed frown; he shared my interest in forbidden books. "Was you really a soldier?" he blurted out before I could shut him up.

"George!" Pa said sternly.

"Did ya really know Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp and Wild Bill Hickok?" my brother demanded.

Uncle Zeb smiled. The nest of fine lines around his eyes wrinkled even more. "I seen Wild Bill oncet," he said in a surprisingly deep strong voice. "Didn't never meet them other fellas."

"Gee!" George whispered. "You *really* seen him?"

"Sure did, George. Clos't as I am to you."

"Tell me about him, huh?"

Pa laughed. "You're gonna have a lot of time to tell stories, Uncle Zeb. Quit bothering him, George. Guess we better get your trunk loaded up and get on home. Kate's waiting dinner for us."

"Kate ain't too pleased, is she, Ansel?" the old man said peering sharply up at Pa.

"She'll be all right. She'll get over it," Pa said. "You know Kate."

She was on the porch to greet us as we drove up the long road to the house, the four of us crowded together in the front seat since Uncle Zeb's old brassbound trunk filled the back of the car.

She came out to us as the old Chevy clattered to a halt—a tall, angular, implacable woman, stiff-shouldered in her gray, lace-neck Sunday dress.

"Uncle Zeb," she said to him, her voice sharp as vinegar, her eyes two black daggers, "it's my Christian duty to take you in and look after you since you've got no other place to go, or so Ansel says, and I'm willing to do my part, though the good Lord knows it won't be easy. I want you to understand one thing, Zebulon Cantrell, I'll not tolerate any of your vile, sinful habits and I won't have you corrupting these innocent little children!"

She turned away from us, her back flat and hard as a gray granite tombstone. Over her shoulder she said, "I don't know what took you so long. The dinner's spoiled. Come and eat."

We carried Uncle Zeb's trunk to the spare bedroom and washed at the sink in the kitchen and went out to the table on the screened porch. Nobody said much at dinner. My stomach was so cold and tight it hurt. I couldn't have eaten much if it had been shoved down my throat. Emma ate two platefuls of the cold, greasy food, placid as a cow. She looked like one, come to think of it.

All week Aunt Kate never said another word to Uncle Zeb that I heard. She just set his place at the table and ignored him. The old man seemed to shrink into himself and get smaller and more wrinkled than ever.

He spent most of his time out in the fields and he did a lot of work considering how old he was. He always had a hoe in his hands and George was always trotting along beside him—when George could get out of Aunt Kate's sight, that is.

I had to help Pa with the haying most of the time that summer. We had two fields of alfalfa to cut and rake and haul and a twenty-acre field of oats. For a man and a twelve-year-old boy it was a lot of work. Sometimes, when I was spreading the hay in the hot barn loft, Uncle Zeb would drive the fork team. He had a natural way with animals, and the team that I had to shout at he controlled with a touch and a word.

The dog followed him around begging to be petted and the barn cats that were so wild that none of us could get near them rubbed on his pants legs. I got so I liked the old man, and George worshiped him in spite of Aunt Kate's best efforts.

The long hot weeks settled into a sort of routine that accepted Uncle Zeb's presence; even Aunt

Kate's bitter hatred seemed to lose its edge. I suppose, thinking about it now, that she was biding her time, waiting for the chance she knew would surely come.

Once, when we were riding in from the hayfield on a load, I asked Pa why she hated Uncle Zeb so.

"You can't blame her, exactly," he said, squinting in the hot sunlight. "It goes back a long time, before we left home—about thirty years ago, I guess. We were living in Ohio then, not far from Cincinnati. Zeb came riding in one day to pay us a visit. He'd settled down a lot by then, was pretty close to fifty, but you wouldn't know it to look at him. He wore his hair sort of long and there wasn't much white in it, and he was tanned and straight as a young pine tree.

"I was a boy then myself and I sure was mighty proud of him. Your Aunt Kate was about twenty or so and she was a sort of lonely girl. The boys didn't take much to her somehow, and—well she'd took up with religion even then. So she tried to convert Zeb. He kept joking her about it, saying wasn't it enough he believed like the Injuns did, in a great spirit and a happy hunting ground?

"Well, she wouldn't let up and he wouldn't give in. Finally Kate got pretty wrathy about it. Zeb said it wasn't fair him giving up his way of life to pleasure her when she didn't even know what his life was like. They must have cooked up some kind of a bargain and she agreed to see what he was talking about because one evening Zeb hitched up the buggy and they drove into town. I don't know how he managed it—" Pa's eyes had a quietly admiring gleam that startled me—"but he got her drunk. I guess they visited some den of iniquity that Kate with all her dark imaginings hadn't been able to think up.

"It was a joke on Zeb's part. I guess her nagging and her pious way of talking drove him to it. She was at him every minute trying to wear him down. Neither of 'em ever said all that happened that night, but Zeb packed up and left the next day."

He looked at me sharply. "Don't you ever let on I told you."

It was that same evening that George said the words. We were doing the milking and George had old Bessie fastened up to the corral fence. He was just learning to milk, so Pa had given him an old gentle cow. She never had kicked or stirred before, but I guess she got tired of George's fumbling. Anyway, she brought up her foot and knocked George and the bucket sprawling.

George got up dripping dirt and milk. He kicked Bessie on the back leg and yelled, "You Gol-durned ol' varmint you!"

Aunt Kate was coming through the corral gate with a bucket to get milk for the house. She gasped, dropped the milk pail, and ran toward George, her harsh voice rising to an unintelligible yapping. She grabbed George, slapped him, dragged him to the watering trough, and doused his head under the scummy surface. George screamed with terror until his head went under. Pa was shouting, and the cows were running and bawling.

Pa rushed over and jerked George out of the trough. He swung around to Aunt Kate and slapped her hard across the face. Aunt Kate stopped yapping. The marks of Pa's fingers were white and then red on her bony cheek.

She put her hand to her face. "You heard him," she said in a shrill whisper. "You heard what that poor innocent child said!"

"I saw you try to drown him!" Pa said grimly. He grabbed his sister by the shoulders and began to shake her. I'd never seen Pa so angry before; he was usually the calm one, the gentle one, but now his big craggy face was dead-white under his tan and his mouth was a twisted thin line.

"I've had enough of this," he said. "I've had a damn bellyful! You treat Uncle Zeb decent and you quit making such a hellfired fool out of yourself or you clear out of here!"

She looked at him. "Blasphemy—that's what it is!" she said, and turned and marched back out of the corral with her head up and her skimpy gray hair falling down her back.

Pa groaned. He picked George up and stood him on his feet. "Let's finish the milking," was all he said.

We brought the pail of milk to the house when we finished. Aunt Kate was putting supper on the table. Her hands were shaking and she looked like she had been crying; but she never said a word and neither did we.

She would have taken her precious Emma and gone, I think, if she had any place to go. If she had packed up and left that night, the inevitable tragedy would never have happened. So blind were we to the coming storm that I think we were a little glad she had no place to go; she was a fine cook and a meticulous housekeeper, and we were accustomed to having our meals on time and having clean, mended shirts and spotless sheets and polished floors and everything kept in its proper place.

She had, when she was close to thirty, married an itinerant evangelist and he had finally run off and left her with one child, Emma. When our mother died, just after George was born, Aunt Kate came to live with us.

Well, after the incident of the words that George said, Aunt Kate minded her tongue—at least, when Pa was around; but her hard little eyes followed Uncle Zeb with a dark foreboding hatred. The house, when we were all in it, was like a battleground during an armed truce.

Uncle Zeb never said much. Quick as he ate he went off to his room. Whenever we could, George and I sneaked in there to listen to his stories and look at the mementos and trophies he had packed in his old trunk. I remember that room, with its crisp curtains, bright rag rugs, and patchwork quilt, and the lamplight shining on the old man's halo of white hair and the musty, sweaty, leathery, tobaccoey smell that came out of that trunk whenever he lifted the lid.

It was like Pandora's box except that the things Uncle Zeb kept in it were memories of the past—buckskins, old and greasy; worn moccasins with dyed porcupine quills on the toes; long eagle-feathered arrows with obsidian points; an old battered army bugle; a rusty cavalry saber; a Bowie knife with a yellowed bone handle; a Sioux buffaloskin medicine shield; two tufts of coarse black hair rooted in something wrinkled, brown, and hard that Uncle Zeb said were scalps; and, best of all, a real rifle—a Winchester .44.

The stories the old man told us as we sat enthralled on the rug at his feet!—of Civil War battles, of Indian raids, of fights with wild animals and wilder men, of posses and shootings and hangings. He showed us the scar on the white, still smooth skin of his chest where he had been knifed and left for dead; the place where a Confederate bullet had plowed through his shoulder at Vicksburg; the long white weal on his thigh where an Indian lance had grazed him.

I think what he told us was true, mostly—perhaps he did add a *little* polish and daring. It would have been hard not to with two bugeyed boys hanging on his every word with breathless awe.

The best nights were the times when Aunt Kate and Emma went off to prayer meeting at the little church about a half mile up the Melford road. Aunt Kate was always trying to make us go with her but George and I put up such a fuss after Uncle Zeb came that Pa said we didn't have to go any more.

Aunt Kate said to him, "Ansel Cantrell, you're doing your best to send those boys straight to hell!"

"Oh, I don't think so," Pa said. He was trying to read his newspaper, *The Fresno Republican.* (The *Republican* later sold out to the *Fresno Bee,* and Pa canceled his subscription because the *Bee* had Democratic leanings.)

"So you don't think so!" Aunt Kate said in a brimstone voice. "You wait and see!"

It was some weeks later that Aunt Kate came into the living room after supper with a strange flat-sided bottle in her hand.

"Ansel!" she almost shouted.

Pa looked up at her.

"I found this in Uncle Zebulon's room. Do you know what it is or will you persist in your willful blindness? The Demon Alcohol, that's what it is!"

"Well?" Pa said calmly.

Aunt Kate seemed about to explode. "What are you going to do about it? That horrible old reprobate is drinking whiskey right under our noses. Do you want your sons to become drunken sots?"

"I haven't seen any signs of that," Pa said mildly. "I expect Uncle Zeb takes a little nip to help him sleep. He ain't hurting anybody."

"He's a felon, a criminal. Don't you know that owning and drinking alcoholic beverages is a crime?"

Pa crumbled his newspaper. His face was getting red. "Damn it, Kate, you let Uncle Zeb alone! You hear me?"

She tossed her head and went back to the kitchen. I guess she threw the bottle out.

A couple of nights later, when George and I slipped into Uncle Zeb's room, he wasn't there. The bed was smooth and unwrinkled in the moonlight that flooded in through the open window. The white curtains moved like ghosts in the night air. We returned to our room and went to bed.

"Where d'ya reckon he is?" George asked. He was almost crying with disappointment.

"I dunno," I said. "Maybe he went out for a walk."

"Let's go find him," George said, popping out of bed.

We pulled on our pants and shirts and we looked all over the farm—but there was no sign of Uncle Zeb.

Next morning before breakfast, while we were in the barn lot feeding the stock, the town constable drove into the yard.

"Mr. Cantrell," he said to Pa, "we've got your uncle in the lockup. He really hung one on last night. We picked him up around midnight parading down Main Street, waving a barrel stave and daring anybody to come out and fight." He grinned. "For an old guy he's a real whizzer."

Pa sighed. "Well," he said, "I guess I better go down and bail him out."

Aunt Kate was as pleased as a hungry cat with a fat mouse. "Now," she said gloatingly, "you see who was right? You've *got* to put him away! He isn't fit to be around innocent children! Drunkard! Jailbird! Ansel, you *can't* let him stay here any longer. In the name of decency I forbid it!"

"Very well, Kate," Pa said at last. "I'll fix up a room for him in the tool house. Will that satisfy you?"

"It's better than nothing!" she said with a taut-lipped smile.

Pa and George and I worked all morning clearing out one room of the small two-room shack we used to store feed, tools, and seed. We got an old bed from the basement and brought in a worn rug and an ancient chest of drawers. Finally we carried out the old brassbound trunk and put it at the foot of the bed. Pa went into town and got Uncle Zeb.

After that the old man seemed to shrink more and more into himself. He'd stand for long minutes in the hot sun, staring off into space as though he saw and heard things that did not exist for us. His hands got more tremulous, his eyes grew faded and sunken, and his deep voice took on the high-pitched, senile quaver of age. When he was talking, he'd often forget what he was saying and sit for minutes staring at nothing.

He began to spend more and more time in his room in the tool shed, with the trunk open, pawing through its contents and muttering, sometimes chuckling, to himself.

One Thursday evening in September, after he had gone out to his room, he came back to the living room where we were gathered. Aunt Kate was sitting in the rocking chair, mending socks, and Pa was buried in his paper. George and I were squabbling over a game of checkers.

Tears ran down the old man's withered cheeks as he came stumbling into the lamplight and he was shaking as though he'd been seized with a dreadful chill.

"What's wrong, Zeb?" Pa exclaimed, jumping up.

"They're gone!" the old man croaked. "All my things! All my plunder!"

"Gone!" Pa said wonderingly. "Who would steal—"

"Nothing was stolen, Ansel," Aunt Kate said placidly. "It was my Christian duty to clean up for him. All that horrible, smelly old junk!"

"What did you do with it?" Pa asked in a terrible voice.

"I burned everything that would burn," Aunt Kate said, rocking back and forth and stabbing a sock with her needle, "and what wouldn't burn I gave to the junkman."

I don't think George or I breathed for a whole minute—all those wonderful things from Uncle Zeb's magic past!

Pa put his arm around the old man's shoulders and led him out. Late that night George and I sneaked out of the house and ran over to the tool shed. Through the window of Uncle Zeb's room we could see the old man lying on his bed and Pa sitting beside him with a grim, sad look on his face dark shadowed by the light from the turned-down lamp. We slipped back to bed.

I was just about asleep when George said, "Webb, d'ya think she gave away the rifle to the junkman?"

"I dunno."

"I bet she didn't." He sat up in bed. "I bet she hid it somewheres."

He was right. Aunt Kate wasn't wasteful. She might give away the dented old bugle and the rusty saber—which would seem to her to have no value at all—but not the gun. We talked about it and decided to search the house the first chance we got.

After breakfast the next morning Uncle Zeb didn't come in and Pa fixed a plate of bacon and eggs and took it out to him. When Aunt Kate and Emma went out to the garden, George and I didn't waste any time.

Breathless with haste we rummaged in the closets, hunted through the cellar, climbed to the attic, and finally found the old Winchester wrapped in newspapers and tucked behind some boxes. Reverently we carried it out of the house and took it to the room in the tool shed.

Uncle Zeb was sitting on the side of his bed, his gnarled old hands hanging limp between his knees. He looked up when we came in but he didn't really seem to see us. We put the rifle on the bed beside him and went out. We couldn't say anything; it was too solemn a moment.

The next morning, Saturday, Pa took Aunt Kate into town to do some shopping. George went along to get a tooth fixed at the dentist's. They left about nine o'clock and I went down to the barn to do some chores.

Uncle Zeb hadn't come out of his room and Pa had carried his food in to him. I stopped to see how he was and he was just sitting there with a blank, beaten look on his wrinkled old face, like he hadn't moved since we'd brought the rifle back.

It was one of those warm Indian Summer mornings, the sun rising yellow and a smell of dust heavy in the still air. I was just about to begin when I heard the shot—a booming roar that shook the air.

Before my ears stopped echoing I was running for the house. I raced up the path and started up the back stairs. *Ka-bloom!* The old rifle spat fire right above my head.

I dropped to the steps and heard Uncle Zeb's voice shouting strong and deep. "Come on, boy! I won't let them red varmints git yuh! Run, boy, run!"

I scrambled up the steps, jerked open the back screen door, and ran into the kitchen. Uncle Zeb was crouched beside the window, peering out into the yard, the Winchester against his shoulder.

Emma was standing in the middle of the living room squealing like a dry wagon axle, her fat soft hands pressed to her ears.

"It's all right, Uncle Zeb," I said soothingly. "There aren't any Indians around here."

"Thar sure be!" he yelled. "See 'em over thar in them trees?" *Ka-bloom!* "Got him! That's one more red devil won't take no more scalps! Oh, there's a passle of 'em, boy!"

He ran agile as a young man to the living-room door and peered around the jamb. "Oh, they're a-comin'! Must be a hunnerd of 'em! See that war paint? See them feather bonnets wavin' and the sun ashinin' on them lances. Ah, they're comin' like a mighty river!"

I tried to grab the rifle. "Uncle Zeb there ain't no Indians!"

He twisted the weapon away from me as though I had no more strength than a baby. He seemed to have grown—become young again. His head was back, his hair flying, his face flushed, his eyes glittering like chips of blue glass.

"You tryin' to get us all kilt?" he shouted at me. "Git yore gun, boy! We'll go down a-fightin'!"

He fired again and again, rushing around the house, peering from the windows, crawling to the doors. I trailed him desperately and tried to talk to him. Emma kept hopping up and down and screaming, her face as red as my bandana handkerchief.

The acrid smell of powder smoke filled the house. The screens were shredded.

"We done drove 'em back, by thunder!" the old man yelled, "but they'll come agin. I got one bullet left, boy, just one. It has to be fer the gal. Ya can't leave a gal to get took by them red devils! Torture! Maybe ya never seen what they do to a woman!"

He leaned close to me, his eyes filled with a bright madness, his words whispered tense and harsh. "They strip 'em naked and then they rip 'em up with knives! They dig out their eyes and skin 'em still alivin'! I've seen it, by God! Ya cain't leave a woman be took!"

Before I could make a move to stop him, he'd stepped up close to Emma and fired that old rifle right into her head. The screaming stopped in a gurgling moan that I'll hear in nightmares the rest of my life. That big soft body flopped to the floor and jerked and twitched and arched convulsively, and finally was still. There wasn't much left of her head and there was blood all over the floor and the wall. I got sick right then and there.

When I was able to look up, Uncle Zeb was standing beside me and looking down at me with a wondering stare. He was shrunken and dried up and very old again, and his hands were shaking so hard he could barely hold on to the old Winchester.

I took it from him and he let me. "There aren't any Indians, Uncle Zeb," I said.

"Course there ain't, boy," he said in a quavering old voice. "That was a long, long time ago."

Out in the driveway I heard the chug-chug of the old Chevy bringing George and Pa and Aunt Kate home from town.

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a *new* crime story by
JULIAN SYMONS

A hard look at an aspect of delinquency in England—juvenile delinquency and adult delinquency, official delinquency and what might be called unofficial delinquency. "The Tiger's Stripe" is one of the probing, provocative studies that Julian Symons refers to—and rightly so—as his "serious short stories in the crime field." It is a story with deep and important ironies, a story that will nag at your thoughts and conscience—and keep nagging . . .

THE TIGER'S STRIPE

by JULIAN SYMONS

It began with the telephone call from Miriam. "Bradley," she said, "There are some boys outside."

Bradley Fawcett recognized in his wife's voice the note of hysteria that was occasionally discernible nowadays. It's the menopause, Dr. Brownlow had said, you must be patient with her. So now his voice took on a consciously patient tone, a talking-to-Miriam tone it might have been called, although he did not think of it in that way.

"Friends of Paul's, you mean?"

"No. Oh, no. Beastly boys. Louts. They took his sweets."

"Took his sweets," Brad echoed stupidly. He stared at the contract on the desk in front of him.

"They asked him for them and he gave them one or two, and then they knocked them out of his hand." She ended on a rising note.

Had she telephoned the office simply to tell him this? Patiently he said, "Calm down now, Miriam. Is Paul upset?"

"No, he's—but they're outside, you see, they're still outside." There was a sound that could have been interpreted as a kind of tinkling crack and then he heard her shriek, "They've broken the glass!"

"What glass?"

"The living room—our beautiful living-room window."

Brad put down the telephone a couple of minutes later, feeling hot and angry. He had not rung the police because they would have come round and talked to Miriam, and he knew that would upset her. The window itself was not important, although he would have to put in a large and expensive sheet of plate glass, but this was not the first trouble they had had with hooligans in The Oasis.

Geoff Cooper's garage wall had been daubed one night with filthy phrases, and on another occasion the flowers in the middle of one of the green areas had been uprooted and strewn around as though by some great animal; on a third occasion the sandpit in the children's playground had been filled with bits of broken glass, and one little boy had cut his foot quite badly.

It was the senselessness of such acts that irritated Brad, as he said to his companions in the train, on the way back from the city to Dunkerley Green. The journey was a short one, no more than twenty minutes, but there were four of them who always made it together. The trains they caught—the 9:12 in the morning and the 6:18 at night—were never crowded, and they preferred the relaxation of sitting in the train to the tension of driving through the traffic.

Geoff Cooper, Peter Stone, and Porky Leighton all lived in The Oasis, and they had other things in common. Cooper was an accountant, Stone ran a travel agency, Porky Leighton was in business as a builder's merchant, and Brad himself was one of the directors of an engineering firm. They all dressed rather similarly for going into the city, in suits of discreet pinstripe or of plain clerical gray. Porky, who had been a Rugger international in his youth, wore a striped tie, but the neckwear of the other three was sober.

They all thought of themselves as professional men, and they all appreciated the civilized amenities of life in The Oasis. Brad, who had passed the age of 50, was the oldest of them by a decade. He liked to feel that they looked to him for counsel, that he was the elder statesman of their little group. He felt the faintest twinge of annoyance that it should have been Geoff Cooper who mentioned the idea of a Residents' Committee. The others took it up so enthusiastically that it seemed incumbent on him to express doubts.

"Forgive me for saying it, Geoff, but just how would it help?"

"Look, Brad, let's start from the point that we're not going to put up with this sort of thing any longer. Right?" That was Porky. He wiped his red face with a handkerchief, for it was hot in the carriage. "And then let's go on to say that the police can't do a damned thing to help us."

"I don't know about that." Brad was never at ease with Porky. It seemed to him that there was an unwelcome undercurrent of mockery in the man-to-man straightforwardness with which Porky spoke to him.

"You know what the police were like when Geoff had that trouble with his garage wall."

"Told me that if I could say who'd done it they would take action." Geoff Cooper snorted. "A lot of use that was."

"The fact is, The Oasis is a private estate and, let's face it, the police don't mind too much what happens. If you want something done, do it yourself, that's my motto." That was Porky again.

"Half the trouble is caused by television," Peter Stone said in his thin fluting voice. "There are programs about them every night, these young toughs. They get puffed up, think they're important. I saw one this week—do you know what it was called? 'The Tigers of Youth'."

Geoff snorted again. Porky commented. "You can tame tigers."

"Nevertheless," Brad said. It was a phrase he often used when he wanted to avoid committing himself.

"Are you against it? A Committee, I mean," Geoff asked.

"I believe there must be some other way of dealing with the problem. I feel sure it would be a good idea to sleep on it."

Did he catch an ironic glance from Porky to the others? He could not be sure. The train drew into Dunkerley Green. Five minutes' walk, and they had reached The Oasis.

There were gates at the entrance to the estate, and a sign asking drivers to be careful because children might be playing. There were green strips in front of the houses, and these strips were protected by stone bollards with chains between them. The houses were set back behind small front lawns, and each house had a back yard. And although the houses were all of the same basic construction, with integral garages and a large through room that went from front to back, with a picture window at each end, there were delightful minor differences—like the basement garden room in Brad's house, which in Geoff's house was a small laundry room, and in Porky's had been laid out as a downstairs kitchen.

Brad's cousin, an architect from London, had once burst into a guffaw when he walked round the estate and saw the bollards and chains. "Subtopia in Excelsis," he had said, but Brad didn't really mind. If this was Subtopia, as he said to Miriam afterward, then Subtopia was one of the best places in England to live.

He had expected to be furiously angry when he saw the broken window, but in fact the hole was so small, the gesture of throwing a stone seemed so pathetic, that he felt nothing at all. When he got indoors, Miriam was concerned to justify her telephone call. She knew that he did not like her to phone him at the office.

"I told them to go away and they just stood there, just stood laughing at me."

"How many of them?"

"Three."

"What did they look like?"

"The one in the middle was big.

They called him John. He was the leader."

"But what did they—"

"Oh, I don't know," she said impatiently. "They all looked the same—you know those ghastly clothes they wear, tight trousers and pointed shoes. I didn't go near them. I called out that I was going to phone the police, and then I came in and spoke to you. Why should they *do* such a thing, Bradley, that's what I don't understand."

She was the only person who called him by his full Christian name, and he had sometimes thought that it typified the nature of their relationship, without knowing quite what that meant. It always seemed, too, that he talked rather more pontifically than usual in Miriam's presence, as though she expected it of him.

"It's a natural youthful impulse to defy authority," he said now. "And when you told them you were going to call the police—why, then they threw the stone."

She began to cry. It did not stop her talking. "You're making it sound as if *I* were in the wrong. But I did nothing, *nothing!*"

"Of course you're not in the wrong. I'm just explaining."

"What harm have we ever done to them?"

"No harm. It's just that you may find it easier if you try to understand them."

"Well, I can't. And I don't *want* to understand." She paused, and said something that astonished him. "Paul knows them. They're his friends."

That was not strictly true, as he discovered when he talked to Paul. They sat in the boy's bedroom, which was full of ingenious space-saving devices, like a shelf which swung out to become a table top. Paul was sitting at this now, doing school work. He seemed to think the whole thing was a fuss about nothing.

"Honestly, Dad, nothing would have happened. We were playing around and Fatty knocked the sweets out of my hand, and it just so happened that Mum had come to the door and saw it. You know what she's like—she let fly."

"Fatty? You know them?"

"Well, they come and play sometimes down on the common, and they let us play with them."

The common was a piece of waste ground nearby, on which Paul sometimes played football and cricket. There was no provision in The Oasis for any kind of ball game.

"Are they friends of yours?"

Paul considered this. He was a handsome boy, rather small for his thirteen years, compact in body and curiously self-contained. At least, Brad thought it was curious; he was intermittently worried by the fact that he could not be sure what Paul was thinking.

Now, after consideration, Paul replied, "I shouldn't say friends. Acquaintances."

"They don't sound like the sort of boys your mother and I would welcome as your friends." Paul said nothing to this. "You were playing with them this afternoon?"

It was all wrong, Brad felt, that he should have to drag the information out of Paul by asking questions; a boy and his father should exchange confidences easily and naturally, but it had never been like that with them.

By direct questioning, of the kind that he felt shouldn't be necessary, he learned that they had been playing football. When they had finished these three boys walked back with Paul to The Oasis. On the way Paul had bought the sweets. Why had they walked back? he asked. Surely they didn't live in Dunkerley Green? Paul shook his head.

"They live in Denholm."

Brad carefully avoided comment. Denholm was a part of the city that he had visited only two or three times in his life. It contained the docks and a good many factories, and also several streets of very dubious reputation.

It would have been against Brad's principles to say that he did not want his son going about with boys from Denholm. Instead, he asked, "Why did they come up here with you? I don't understand that." Paul muttered something, and Brad repeated rather sharply, "Why, Paul, why?"

Paul raised his head and looked his father straight in the face. "John, said, 'Let's have another look at Snob Hill.' "

"Snob Hill," Brad echoed. "That's what they call The Oasis?"

"Yes. He said, 'Let's see if they've put barbed wire round it yet.' "

"Barbed wire?"

"To keep them out."

Brad felt something—something that might have been a tiny bird—leap inside his stomach. With intentional brutality he went on, "You live here. On Snob Hill. I'm surprised they have anything to do with you."

Paul muttered again, so that the words were only just audible. "They think I'm okay."

Brad gripped his son's shoulder, felt the fine bones beneath his hand. "You think it's all right for them to throw stones, to break windows?"

"Of course I don't."

"This John, what's his last name?"

"Baxter."

"Where does he live?"

"I don't know." Paul hesitated, then said, "I expect he'll be in The Club."

"The Club?"

"They go there most nights."

"Where is it?"

"East Street."

A horrifying thought occurred to Brad. "Have you been there?"

"They say I'm too young." Paul stopped, then said, "Dad."

"Yes?"

"I shouldn't go there. It won't do any good." With an effort, as though he were explaining, saying something that made sense, he added, "You won't like it."

In the time that it took to drive to Denholm, the bird that had been fluttering in Brad's stomach had quieted down. He was, as he often said, a liberal with a small "1." He believed that there was no problem which could not be solved by discussion round a table, and that you should always make an effort to see the other fellow's point of view.

The trip by car gave him time to think about his own attitude, and to admit that he had been a bit unreasonable. He could understand that these boys held a sort of glamor for Paul, could even understand to a certain extent their feelings about The Oasis. And just because he understood, it would be silly, it would even be cowardly, not to face them and talk to them.

Much of Denholm was dark, but East Street blazed with neon lights. There seemed to be a dozen clubs of various kinds, as well as several cafes, and he had to ask for The Club. He did so at first without success, then a boy giggled and said that he was standing almost in front of it.

As Brad descended steps to a basement and advanced toward a wall of syncopated sound, he felt for the first time a doubt about the wisdom of his mission.

The door was open, and he entered a low-ceilinged cellar room. At the far end of it four boys were singing or shouting on a raised platform. In front of him couples moved, most of them not holding each other, but gyrating in strange contortions that he had never seen before except in one or two television programs.

The atmosphere was remarkably clear. Well, at least most of them are nonsmokers, he thought, and was pleased that he hadn't lost his sense of humor. He spoke to a boy who was standing by a wall.

"Can you tell me where to find John Baxter?"

The boy stared at him, and Brad repeated the question.

"John?" The boy gave Brad a long deliberate look, from face to shoes. Then somebody tapped Brad's shoulders from behind. He turned to face a fat boy wearing a purple shirt, jeans, and elastic-sided shoes.

The fat boy muttered something lewd.

His other shoulder was tapped. A boy with bad teeth grinned at him. "You want the john?"

The first boy, not the fat one, tapped him, repeating the lewd remark.

The fat boy tapped him again. "It's just looking at you. This way." He walked slowly round Brad, staring at him. " 'Cause we never seen nothing so square before, get it?"

As Brad looked at the clothes of the three boys around him, clothes that were different in several ways and yet were identical in the brightness of their shirts, the tightness of their jeans, and the pointedness of their shoes, he had the ridiculous feeling that it was he and not they who were outraging orthodoxy, that his neat dark suit and well-polished square-toed shoes were badges of singularity, the clothing of an outlaw.

The sensation lasted for only a moment. Then he shouted—he had to shout, because the tribal music rose suddenly to a louder beat— "I want John Baxter."

The boy with the bad teeth tapped him. "You ask for the john, then you don't pay attention. I don't like that, not polite. I'm John."

Brad faced him. "You are? You're the John who—"

The fat boy said, "You heard that, he said you're the john. You going to take that?"

The three of them had closed in so that they were now almost touching him, and he thought incredulously: they're going to attack me. Then a voice said, "Break it up, come on now, break it up."

The three boys moved back, and a stocky man with thick eyebrows and arms like marrows said, "Whatcher want?" Brad found it hard to speak. The man went on, "They're blocked. You don't want to get mixed up with 'em when they're blocked."

"Blocked?" It was a new country, a new language.

"I'm here if there's trouble, but they're no trouble—it's you that's making trouble, mister."

"I didn't—that's not true."

"So they're blocked, they feel good, have fun, what's the harm? You don't belong, mister. They don't like you, so why don't you just get out?"

He could just hear himself say *all right, all right*. Then there was a small scream from the dance floor, and a girl cried, "He hit me." The bouncer began to push his way through the crowd on the dance floor.

Brad stumbled away, eager to go, and had almost reached the outer door when there was one more tap on his shoulder. He turned again, putting up his fists. A tall dark boy he had not seen before asked, "Want me?"

The boy was dressed like the others, but there was something different about him—a kind of authority and even arrogance. "You're John Baxter?"

"What do you want?"

Behind him was the fat boy who said now, with a hint of silly irrational laughter in his voice, "He says he wants John, see, so we're—"

"Shut it, Fatty," the dark boy said. The fat boy stopped talking.

"I'm Bradley Fawcett."

"Should I care?"

"I'm the father of the boy—" He stopped, began again. "You threw a stone and broke our window."

"I did?" The boy sounded politely surprised. "Can you prove it?"

"You did it, isn't that so? My wife should recognize you."

"I tell you what," the dark boy said. "You got a suspicious mind. You don't want to go around saying things like that—might get you into trouble."

A fair-haired girl came up, pulled at the tall dark boy's arm. "Come on, John."

"Later, Jean. Busy." He did not stop looking at Brad.

In Brad's stomach the bird was fluttering again, a bird of anger now. He said carefully, "I believe you call the place where I live Snob Hill—"

The boy laughed. "It's a good name for it."

"I've come to warn you and your friends to keep away from it. And keep away from my son."

Fatty crowed in a falsetto voice, "Don't touch my darling boy."

"Do I make myself clear?"

"John," the girl said. "Don't let's have any trouble. Please."

The tall dark boy looked Brad up and down. Then smiled. "We do what we like. It's a free country, they say, and if we want to come up to Snob Hill, see your son, we do it. But I'll tell you what—we'd like to make you happy. If you haven't got the money to pay for the window—" Brad raised a hand in protest, but it was ignored. "—we'll have a whip round in The Club here. How's that?"

He laughed, and behind him came the sound of other laughter, sycophantic and foolish. They were all laughing at Brad, and it was hard now to control the bird that leaped inside him. He would have liked to smash the sneering, laughing face in front of him with his fist.

But what he did in fact was to run up the steps to the street, get into his car, slam it into gear, and drive hurriedly away. It was as though some fury were pursuing him; but there was no fury, nothing worse than the sound—which he continued to hear in his ears during most of the drive home—of that mocking laughter.

When he opened the living-room door their faces were all turned to him—Porky's, Geoff's, Peter's, eager and expectant. He stared at the three of them with a kind of hostility, even though they were his friends. Geoff was their spokesman.

"We were talking again, Brad, about that idea."

"Idea?" He went over and poured whiskey.

"The Residents' Committee. We all think it's pretty good, something we should have done a long while ago. We came to ask if you'd let us nominate you for chairman."

"Brad!" That was Miriam, who had come in from the kitchen with coffee on a tray. "Whatever are you doing?"

"What?" Then he realized that he had poured whiskey for himself without offering it to his guests. He said, "Sorry," and filled their glasses. Porky was watching him with the ironical gaze.

"Hear you bearded the tigers on your own, Brad. How did it go?"

Miriam asked in a high voice, "Did you see them? Are they going to pay for the window?"

"I saw them. They're louts, hooligans."

"Of course they are," Peter fluted.

"I told them some home truths, but it's impossible to talk to them. They—" But he found that he could not go into the humiliating details. "They've got a kind of club. I saw them there, and I met the ringleader. I shall go to the police tomorrow morning."

Porky stared at him, but said nothing. Geoff threw up his hands. "You won't get anywhere with the police."

Miriam came over to him. "They *will* do something? Surely we've got a right to protection. We don't have to let them do what they like, do we? They frighten me, Bradley."

"The best form of protection is self-protection," Porky said, and expanded on it. "We've got the nucleus of a Residents' Committee right here. We can easily get another dozen to join us, mount guard at night, look after our own properties. And if we find these tigers, we'll know how to deal with them."

Miriam looked at Brad inquiringly. It seemed to him that they all waited on his judgment. Just for a moment a picture came into his mind—the picture of a tiger with the dark sneering face of John Baxter, a tiger being hunted through the gardens of The Oasis; then the picture vanished as though a shutter had been placed over it. What was all this nonsense about tigers?

Brad Fawcett, a liberal with a small "l," began to speak.

"I think we should be extremely careful about this. I'm not saying it isn't a good idea; I think it is, and I'm inclined to agree that it should have been set up long ago. But I do say we ought to think more carefully about ways and means. There are lots of aspects to it, but essentially it's a community project, and since you've been good enough to come to me, may I suggest that the first step is to sound out our fellow residents and see how many of them like the idea . . ."

As he went on he found that verbalization brought him self-assurance, as it did when he got up to speak as chairman of the Rotary Club. He was not disturbed by the unwinking stare of Porky's little eyes, and if Geoff Cooper looked bored and Peter Stone disappointed, he pretended not to notice it.

They talked for another half hour and drank some more whiskey, and by the time the others said good night, see you on the 9:12, the recollection of the visit to Denholm had become no more than a faint disturbance inside him, like indigestion. It did not become urgent again even when Miriam, gripping him tightly in bed, whispered, "You *will* go to the police in the morning, won't you?"

Sleepily he said that he would—before he caught his train.

At 11:30; the following morning he was preparing with his secretary, Miss Hornsby, an intricate schedule for a conference to begin at noon. The conference was about the installation of new boilers, and his mind was full of maintenance costs when he picked up the telephone.

Miriam's voice asked, "What did they say?"

For a moment he did not know what she was talking about, so utterly had he shut away that unsatisfactory interview at the police station. Then he remembered.

"The police? They seemed to think we were making a mountain out of a molehill. Perhaps they were right."

"But what did they *say?"*

"They said if we could identify the boy who broke the window—"

"We can," she said triumphantly. "Paul can. He knows them."

"They explained that it would mean Paul being the chief witness. He would be examined, perhaps cross-examined, in court. We don't want that, do we?"

In her high voice she said, "I suppose not."

"Of course we don't. At the moment he's taken it quite calmly. I can't think of anything worse than dragging him through the courts."

"No." There was silence. Miss Hornsby raised her eyebrows, pointed at her watch. With the note of hysteria in her voice, Miriam said, "I'm sorry to bother you—"

"It's all right. I should have phoned you, but I've had a lot of work piled up, still have."

"Isn't there *anything* the police can do?"

"I've told you what they said." He was patient; he kept the irritation out of his voice. "We'll talk about it later."

"What time will you be home? Can you come home early?"

Still patiently, speaking as though to a child, he said, "I have to go into conference at noon, and I don't know when I shall be free. I won't be able to take any phone calls. Pull yourself together, Miriam, and stop worrying."

As he put down the receiver he saw Miss Hornsby's eyes fixed speculatively on him. He felt guilty, but what had he said that was wrong or untrue? Paul had been tremendously cheerful at breakfast, and had gone off in high spirits. As for the police, the Sergeant had as good as said they had more important crimes to worry about than a broken window. Brad sighed, and returned to the schedule.

He came out of the conference six hours later, feeling tight and tense all over. The client had queried almost everything in the estimate, from the siting of the boilers to the cost of the material used for lining them. He had finally agreed to revise the whole plan. Miss Hornsby had sat in, making notes, but when he got back to his room her assistant, a scared-looking girl, came in.

"Your wife telephoned, Mr. Fawcett. Three times. She said it was very important, but you'd said nothing at all must be put through, so—"

"All right. Get her for me."

"I hope I did right."

"Just get her for me, will you?"

Half a minute later Miriam's voice, in his ear, was crying, "They've got him, they've got him, Bradley—he's gone!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Paul. He's not come home from school. He's an hour and a half late."

"Have you called the school?"

"Oh, yes, yes," she cried, as though eager to get as quickly as possible through all such silly questions and force on him realization of what had happened. "I've spoken to them. He left at the usual time. I've been down to the common, he hasn't been there, I've done everything. Don't you see, Bradley, those boys have *taken* him. After you went to see them last night, this is their—their revenge."

He saw again John Baxter's face, dark and sneering; he remembered the things that had been said in The Club; he knew that what she had said was true. Heavily he said, "Yes. Leave it to me."

"Bradley, what are they doing to my little boy?"

"He's my boy too," he said. "I'll get him back. Leave it to me."

When he had hung up he sat for a moment, and felt the bird leaping in his belly again. You try to treat them decently, he thought, you try to be reasonable and discuss things with them, and this is what you get. They are like animals, and you have to treat them like animals. He dialed Porky Leighton's number.

Porky wasted no time in saying, "I told you so." He was brisk. "This calls for action, old man. Agreed?"

"Yes."

"Right, then. This is what we do . . ."

A thin rain was falling as they pulled up outside The Club. They grouped on the pavement, and Brad pointed down the steps. Porky led the way, the others followed. The door was closed, but it opened when Porky turned the handle. There was no sound of music inside and the room seemed to be empty.

"Nobody here," Geoff Cooper said disgustedly. Then two figures came out from the other end of the room, behind the band platform.

Brad cried out, "There he is."

The four of them advanced on the boy. Porky brought him crashing to the floor with a Rugger tackle. There was a short scuffle and then, in a moment it seemed, the boy's hands were tied behind his back.

The boy's companion launched herself at Porky. It was the fair-haired girl who had been with Baxter the previous night. Geoff and Peter held her. She was wearing jeans and a boy's shirt.

"Hard to know if it's a boy or girl," Peter said. He put his hand on her and laughed on a high note. "You can just about tell."

The girl cried out, and Porky turned on Peter. "Cut it out. None of that—you know what we're here for. We've got no quarrel with you, you aren't going to get hurt," he said to the girl. He said to Baxter, "You know why we're here."

The boy spoke for the first time. "You're off your beat, fatso. Shove off."

They had gone to The Oasis before coming down here, and changed into the old clothes they wore on week-ends for gardening or cleaning the car—clothes so different from their neat daily wear as to be in themselves a kind of uniform. Porky's thick jersey made him look fatter than usual. He was wearing gym shoes, and he balanced himself carefully on his toes.

"Just a few questions, Baxter. Answer them and we won't have any trouble. Where's the gang? Why is the place empty?"

"It's not club night."

"Why are you here?"

"Cleaning up for tomorrow. What's it to you?"

Porky stuck his red face close to the boy's dark one, jerked a thumb at Brad. "Know him?"

"That drip. He was in here last night."

"You know his son. Where is he?"

Baxter looked at him with a half sneer, half smile. "Tucked up in bed—would that be the right answer?"

Brad saw Porky's hand, large as a knuckle of ham, swing back and slap Baxter's face. The bird leaped inside him, throbbed so violently that his chest was tight. There was a ring on Porky's finger, and it had cut the boy's cheek.

"Not the right answer," Porky said. "The boy's been kidnaped. By your friends, while you've fixed yourself a pretty little alibi to keep out of trouble. We want to know where he is."

"I'll tell you what to do."

"What?"

Baxter sneered. "Ask a policeman."

The bird fluttered up into Brad's throat. He moved toward Baxter with his fist raised. He wanted to speak, but he was breathing so hard he could say nothing intelligible.

After that it was all dreamlike.

He participated in what was done—binding up the girl's mouth so that she could not cry out, locking the basement door, bundling the boy out into the car; but it did not seem to him that Bradley Fawcett was doing these things. Another person did them—somebody who had been released from Bradley Fawcett's habitual restraints. In this release there was freedom, some kind of freedom.

They had come in his car, and as he drove back he took a hand from the driving wheel and passed it over his face. He was not surprised to find the skin damp, cold, unfamiliar. He absented himself from the presence of the others in the car, and thought about Miriam—how she had clung to him when he returned, and had begged him to go back to the police.

No, we're going to deal with it ourselves, he had told her quietly and patiently, as he took off his city clothes and put on his weekend ones. Who were "we?" Porky and the others who had come to the house last night.

"What are you going to do?"

"See them. Find out what they've done with Paul. Get him back."

"You really think that's best?" Without waiting for him to say yes, she went on, "You won't do anything to make them hurt Paul, will you?"

The very thought of Paul being hurt had made him feel sick and angry. "What do you think I am?" he asked, and as he repeated the words he was aware that they were a question—and one to which he could provide no simple answer, the way he might have a few days or even a few hours earlier.

As he was leaving she had come up and held him close to her. "It's all our fault, isn't it?"

"*Our* fault?"

"Something to do with us. People like us."

He had stared at her, then disengaged her arms, and left the house . . .

They took the boy into the garage. His arms were still tied behind his back. The small cut on his cheek had dried. He made no attempt to call for help, or even to speak, but simply looked at them.

"All right," Porky said. "That saw bench over there is just the job, Geoff. Agreed?" He had brought in with him from the car a small leather attache case, and now he took out of it a length of rope. Geoff and Peter bent Baxter over the saw bench.

"Stop," Bradley Fawcett said. "What are you doing?"

"He needs a lesson. All agreed on that, aren't we? Let's give him one. Here's teacher." And now Porky took something else from the attache case and held it up, laughing. It was a thick leather strap.

As the bird inside him fluttered and leaped and hammered on his chest trying to get out, Bradley Fawcett said in a strange voice, "We must ask him first. Don't do anything without asking him again first."

Porky's glance at him was amused, contemptuous, tolerant. "We've asked already, but let's do it according to Hoyle." Casually he said to Baxter, "Where's Paul? What have you done with him?"

Baxter spat out an obscenity. "If I knew, d'you think I'd tell you?" And he spat out another obscenity.

"Very nice." Porky savored the response almost with pleasure. "You see what we're up against, Brad. He's a tiger. We must show him we're tigers too."

Brad took no part in stretching the boy over the bench and securing his feet. Instead, he considered wonderingly the garage, in which everything was stacked tidily—the mower in one corner with its small bag of spanners beside it; the hoe, rake, garden shears, standing in racks; the packets of grass seed and weed killer on a shelf; Paul's canoe suspended by pulleys. Surely this was the apparatus of a harmless and a decent life?

Yet he knew that he would never again be able to look at these things without thinking of the intrusion among them of this boy with his insolent manner and his strange clothing—the boy who was now bent over the saw bench with his trousers down around his ankles and some of his flesh visible, while Porky stood to the right of him holding the strap and Geoff tucked the boy's head firmly under his arm.

Brad took no part, but he found himself unable to move or to speak while the bird leaped within him, was quiet, then leaped again in its anxiety to escape as the belt descended and a red mark showed on the white flesh. The bird leaped violently at sight of that red mark and Brad jerked a hand up in the air—but what did he mean to say with that outstretched hand? Was it a gesture of encouragement or of rejection?

He wondered about this afterward and was never able to know if the answer he gave was honest; but at the time he could not wonder what the gesture meant for the garage door opened, Paul stood framed in it, and Brad was the first to see him. Brad said nothing, but he made a noise in his throat and pointed, and Porky half turned and lowered the strap.

"Dad," Paul said. "Mr. Leighton. I saw a light. What are you doing?"

In his voice there was nothing but bewilderment. He had his school cap on, he looked handsome and detached, as an adult might look who had discovered children *playing some ridiculous secret game.*

Bradley Fawcett ran forward, grabbed his son's arm and shook it, trying to shake him out of that awful detachment, and said in a voice which he was horrified to hear come out as high and hysterical as his wife's, "Where have you been? What's happened to you?"

"Happened? I went to Ainslie's party. Ainslie Evans, you know him."

"Why didn't you tell anybody? You've got no right—" He could not think what it was that Paul had no right to do.

"But I did tell—I told mummy yesterday morning. She must have forgotten."

Paul took his arm away from his father's hand. He was looking beyond Brad to where Geoff and Peter were untying John Baxter, who drew up his trousers. "Why were you beating John? Have you kidnaped him or something? Is this your idea of a joke?"

Porky gave a short snarl of laughter.

Paul went on. "It's something to do with that broken window, isn't it?" Now he faced his father and said deliberately, "I'll tell you something. I'm glad they broke that window."

"Paul," Brad cried out. He held out his hand to his son, but the boy ignored it. Paul stood in the doorway and seemed about to say something decisive, irrevocable. Then the door closed behind him.

John Baxter had his trousers zipped. He looked from one to the other of them. "It was assault. I could make a case out of it. If I wanted."

"It was a mistake." Geoff cleared his throat. "I don't know about the others, but I don't suppose you'd say no to a fiver." He took out his wallet.

Peter already had his wallet out.

Porky said, "Don't be silly." They stared at him.

"Have you forgotten who he is? He's the little punk who daubs garages and breaks windows. What are you giving him fivers for—to come back and do it again?" When he spoke to John Baxter, the cords of his thick neck showed clearly. "You were lucky. You just got a little taste of what's good for you. Next time it might be more than a taste, eh, Brad?"

"It's done now," Brad said mechanically. He was not thinking of the boy, but of the look on Paul's face.

"Don't worry," Baxter said. "You can stuff your money. But next time you come our way, look out."

"We won't—" Geoff began to say.

"Because next time we'll be ready for you, and we'll cut you. So look out."

Then the garage door closed behind him too, and Porky was saying with a slight laugh, as he snapped his attache case, "All's well that ends well, no harm done, but you certainly want to be careful of what your wife says, Brad old man."

The bird fluttered again within him, and he found relief in shouting, "Shut up!"

Peter Stone fluted at him. "I think

you're being unreasonable. We were doing it for you."

"Get out!" Brad held open the door. Outside was darkness.

"You're overwrought." Porky was smiling. "A good night's sleep's what you need, Brad old man."

They walked away down the path, Porky with a slight swagger, Peter Stone with an air of being the injured party. Geoff Cooper was last. He gave Brad's arm a slight squeeze, and said, "You're upset. I don't blame you. See you on the 9:12."

I never want to see you again; you have made me do things I never intended—things I know to be unworthy: those were the words he cried out in his mind, but they remained unspoken.

He stood there for some minutes after the sound of their footsteps faded, and looked at the light in the house which showed that Miriam was waiting to receive him in a gush of apologetic tears; and as he stood there he came slowly to the realization that Porky was right in saying no harm had been done.

A young tough had got a stripe on his backside, and very likely it would do him good. And as for Paul, it was absurd to think that what he had seen would affect him, or their relationship, permanently.

Bradley Fawcett's thoughts drifted away, and suddenly he found that instead of being concerned with Paul he was reliving that moment in which leather struck flesh and the bird had leaped violently, passionately, ecstatically, within him.

As he dismissed these thoughts and walked over to the house and the lighted window, he reflected that of course he would catch the 9:12 in the morning. There was for him, after all, no other train to take.

POE
DOYLE
CHRISTIE
Queen
HAMMETT
Gardner

The Ellery Queen book of shorts titled CALENDAR OF CRIME *consists of 12 stories, each with a theme or background or character or clue related to the month in which the story is published (Thanksgiving Day story for November, Christmas story for December, etc.). The series began to appear in print in 1946, and was finally collected in book form in 1952, more than a decade ago.*

For some time now, many readers have urged us to reprint the "Calendar of Crime" sequence. So, we begin in this, EQMM's 24th Anniversary Issue, with the story for February—a story about George Washington's birthday and how Ellery matched wits with the Father of His Country and, in the dead of night, wrestled with the First President's ghost . . .

THE PRESIDENT'S HALF DISME

by ELLERY QUEEN

THOSE FEW CURIOUS MEN WHO have chosen to turn off the humdrum highway to hunt for their pleasure along the back trails expect—indeed, they look confidently forward to—many strange encounters; and it is the dull stalk which does not turn up at least a hippogriff. But it remained for Ellery Queen to experience the ultimate excitement. On one of his prowls he collided with a President of the United States.

This would have been joy enough if it had occurred as you might imagine: by chance, on a dark night, in some back street of Washington, D.C., with Secret Service men closing in on the delighted Mr. Queen to question his motives by way of his pockets while a large black bullet-proof limousine rushed up to spirit the powerless President away.

But mere imagination fails in this instance. What is required is the power of fancy, for the truth is fantastic. Ellery's encounter with the President of the United States took place, not on a dark night, but in the unromantic light of several days (although the night played its role, too). Nor was it by chance: the meeting was arranged by a farmer's daughter. And it was not in Washington, D.C., for this President presided over the affairs of the nation from a different city altogether.

Not that the meeting took place in that city, either; it did not take place in a city at all, but on a farm some miles south of Philadelphia. Oddest of all, there was no limou-

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sine to spirit the Chief Executive away, for while the President was a man of great wealth, he was still too poor to possess an automobile and, what is more, not all the resources of his Government—indeed, not all the riches of the world—could have provided one for him.

There are even more curious facets to this jewel of paradox. This was an encounter in the purest sense, and yet, physically, it did not occur at all. The President in question was dead. And while there are those who would not blink at a rubbing of shoulders or a clasping of hands even though one of the parties was in his grave—and to such persons the thought might occur that the meeting took place on a psychic plane—alas, Ellery Queen is not of their company. He does not believe in ghosts, consequently he never encounters them. So he did not collide with the President's shade, either.

And yet their meeting was as palpable as, say, the meeting between two chess masters, one in London and the other in New York, who never leave their respective armchairs and still play a game to a decision. It is even more wonderful than that, for while the chess players merely annihilate space, Ellery and the father of his country annihilated time—a century and a half of it.

In fine, this is the story of how Ellery Queen matched wits with George Washington.

Those who are finicky about their fashions complain that the arms of coincidence are too long; but in this case the Designer might say that He cut to measure. Or, to put it another way, an event often brews its own mood. Whatever the cause, the fact is that The Adventure of the President's Half Disme, which was to concern itself with the events surrounding President Washington's 59th birthday, actually first engrossed Ellery on February 19th and culminated three days later.

Ellery was in his study that morning, wrestling with several reluctant victims of violence, none of them quite flesh and blood, since his new novel was still in the planning stage. So he was annoyed when Nikki came in with a card.

"James Ezekiel Patch," growled the great man; he was never in his best humor during the planning stage. "I don't know any James Ezekiel Patch, Nikki. Toss the fellow out and get back to transcribing those notes on Possible Motives —"

"Why, Ellery," said Nikki. "This isn't like you at all."

"What isn't like me?"

"To renege on an appointment."

"Appointment? Does this Patch claim—"

"He doesn't merely claim it. He proves it."

"Someone's balmy," snarled Mr. Queen; and he strode into the living room to contend with James Ezekiel Patch. This, he perceived as soon as James Ezekiel Patch rose from the Queen fireside chair, was likely to be a heroic project. Mr. Patch, notwithstanding his mild, even studious, eyes, seemed to rise indefinitely; he was a large, a very large, man.

"Now what's all this?" demanded Ellery fiercely; for after all Nikki was there.

"That's what I'd like to know," said the large man amiably. "What did you want with me, Mr. Queen?"

"What did I want with you! What did you want with me?"

"I find this very strange, Mr. Queen."

"Now see here, Mr. Patch, I happen to be extremely busy this morning—"

"So am I." Mr. Patch's large thick neck was reddening and his tone was no longer amiable. Ellery took a cautious step backward as his visitor lumbered forward to thrust a slip of yellow paper under his nose. "Did you send me this wire, or didn't you?"

Ellery considered it tactically expedient to take the telegram, although for strategic reasons he did so with a bellicose scowl.

IMPERATIVE YOU CALL AT MY HOME TOMORROW FEBRUARY NINETEEN PROMPTLY TEN A.M. SIGNED ELLERY QUEEN

"Well, sir?" thundered Mr. Patch. "Do you have something on Washington for me, or don't you?"

"Washington?" said Ellery absently, studying the telegram.

"*George* Washington, Mr. Queen! I'm Patch the antiquarian. I *collect* Washington. I'm an *authority* on Washington. I have a large fortune and I spend it all on Washington! I'd never have wasted my time this morning if your name hadn't been signed to this wire! This is my busiest week of the year. I have engagements to speak on Washington—"

"Desist, Mr. Patch," said Ellery. "This is either a practical joke, or—"

"The Baroness Tchek," announced Nikki clearly. "With another telegram." And then she added, "And Professor John Cecil Shaw, ditto."

The three telegrams were identical.

"Of course I didn't send them," said Ellery thoughtfully, regarding this three visitors. Baroness Tchek was a short powerful woman, resembling a dumpling with gray hair; an angry dumpling. Professor Shaw was lank and long-jawed, wearing a sack suit which hung in some places and failed in its purpose by inches at the extremities. Along with Mr. Patch, they constituted as deliciously queer a trio as had ever congregated in the Queen apartment. Their host suddenly determined not to let go of them. "On the other hand, someone obviously did, using my name. . . ."

"Then there's nothing more to be said," snapped the Baroness, snapping her bag for emphasis.

"I should think there's a great deal more to be said," began Professor Shaw in a troubled way. "Wasting people's time this way—"

"It's not going to waste any more of *my* time," growled the large Mr. Patch. "Washington's Birthday only three days off—!"

"Exactly," smiled Ellery. "Won't you sit down? There's more in this than meets the eye . . . Baroness Tchek, if I'm not mistaken, you're the one who brought the fabulous collection of rare coins into the United States just before Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia? You're in the rare coin business in New York now?"

"Unfortunately," said the Baroness coldly, "one must eat."

"And you, sir? I seem to know you."

"Rare books," said the Professor in the same troubled way.

"Of course. John Cecil Shaw, the rare book collector. We've met at Mim's and other places. I abandon my first theory. There's a pattern here, distinctly unhumorous. An antiquarian, a coin dealer, a collector of rare books—Nikki? Whom have you out there this time?"

"If this one collects anything," muttered Nikki into her employer's ear, "I'll bet it has two legs and hair on its chest. A darned pretty girl—"

"Named Martha Clarke," said a cool voice; and Ellery turned to find himself regarding one of the most satisfying sights in the world.

"Ah, I take it, Miss Clarke, you also received one of these wires signed with my name?"

"Oh, no," said the pretty girl. "I'm the one who sent them."

There was something about the comely Miss Clarke which inspired, if not confidence, at least an openness of mind. Perhaps it was the self-possessed manner in which she sat all of them, including Ellery, down in Ellery's living room while she waited on the hearth rug, like a conductor on the podium, for them to settle in their chairs. And it was the measure of Miss Clarke's assurance that none of them was indignant, only curious.

"I'll make it snappy," said Martha Clarke briskly. "I did what I did the way I did it because, first, I had to make sure I could see Mr. Patch, Baroness Tchek, and Professor Shaw today. Second, because I may need a detective before I'm through . . . Third," she added, almost absently, "because I'm pretty desperate.

"My name is Martha Clarke. My father Tobias is a farmer. Our farm lies just south of Philadelphia, it was built by a Clarke in 1761, and it's been in our family ever since. I won't go gooey on you. We're broke and there's a mortgage. Unless Papa and I can raise twelve thousand dollars in the next couple of weeks we lose the old homestead."

Professor Shaw looked vague. But the Baroness said, "Deplorable, Miss Clarke. Now if I'm to run my auction this afternoon—"

And James Ezekiel Patch grumbled, "If it's money you want, young woman—"

"Certainly it's money I want. But I have something to sell."

"Ah!" said the Baroness.

"Oh?" said the Professor.

"Hm," said the antiquarian.

Mr. Queen said nothing, and Miss Porter jealously chewed the end of her pencil.

"The other day while I was cleaning out the attic, I found an old book."

"Well, now," said Professor Shaw indulgently. "An old book, eh?"

"It's called *The Diary of Simeon Clarke*. Simeon Clarke was Papa's great-great-great-something or other. His *Diary* was privately printed in 1792 in Philadelphia, Professor, by a second cousin of his, Jonathan, who was in the printing business there."

"Jonathan Clarke. *The Diary of Simeon Clarke,*" mumbled the cadaverous book collector. "I don't believe I know either, Miss Clarke. Have you . . .?"

Martha Clarke carefully unclasped a large manila envelope and drew forth a single yellowed sheet of badly printed paper. "The title page was loose, so I brought it along."

Professor Shaw silently examined Miss Clarke's exhibit, and Ellery got up to squint at it. "Of course," said the Professor after a long scrutiny, in which he held the sheet up to the light, and performed other mysterious rites, "mere age doesn't connote rarity, nor does rarity of itself constitute value. And while this page looks genuine for the purported period and is rare enough to be unknown to me, still . . ."

"Suppose I told you," said Miss Martha Clarke, "that the chief purpose of the *Diary*—which I have at home—is to tell the story of how George Washington visited Simeon Clarke's farm in the winter of 1791—"

"Clarke's farm? 1791?" exclaimed James Ezekiel Patch. "Preposterous. There's no record of—"

"And of what George Washington buried there," the farmer's daughter concluded.

By executive order the Queen telephone was taken off its hook, the door was bolted, the shades were drawn, and the long interrogation began. By the middle of the afternoon the unknown chapter in the life of the Father of His Country was fairly sketched.

Early on an icy gray February morning in 1791, Farmer Clarke had looked up from the fence he was mending to observe a splendid cortège galloping down on him from the direction of the City of Philadelphia. Outriders thundered in the van, followed by a considerable company of gentlemen on horseback and several great coaches-and-six driven by liveried Negroes.

To Simeon Clarke's astonishment, the entire equipage stopped before his farmhouse. He began to run. He could hear the creak of springs and the snorting of sleek and sweating horses. Gentlemen and lackeys were leaping to the frozen ground, and by the time Simeon had reached the farmhouse, all were elbowing about the first coach, a magnificent affair bearing a coat of arms.

Craning, the farmer saw within the coach a very large, great-nosed gentleman clad in a black velvet suit and a black cloak faced with gold; there was a cocked hat on his wigged head and a great sword in a white leather scabbard at his side. This personage was on one knee, leaning with an expression of considerable anxiety over a chubby lady of middle age, swathed in furs, who was half sitting, half lying on the upholstered seat, her eyes closed and her cheeks waxen under the rouge. Another gentlemen, soberly attired, was stooping over the lady, his fingers on one pale wrist.

"I fear," he was saying with great gravity to the kneeling man, "that it would be imprudent to proceed another yard in this weather, Your Excellency. Lady Washington requires physicking and a warm bed immediately."

Lady Washington! Then the large, richly dressed gentleman was the President! Simeon Clarke pushed excitedly through.

"Your Mightiness! Sir!" he cried, "I am Simeon Clarke. We have warm beds, Sarah and I!"

The President considered Simeon briefly. "I thank you, Farmer Clarke. No, no, Dr. Craik. I shall assist Lady Washington myself."

And George Washington carried his Martha Washington into the little Pennsylvania farmhouse of Simeon and Sarah Clarke. An aide informed the Clarkes that President Washington had been on his way to Virginia to celebrate his 59th birthday in the privacy of Mount Vernon.

Instead, he passed his birthday on the Clarke farm, for the physician insisted that the President's lady could not be moved, even back to the nearby Capital, without risking complications. On His Excellency's order the entire incident was kept secret. "It would give needless alarm to the people," he said. But he did not leave Martha's bedside for three days and three nights.

Presumably during those 72 hours, while his lady recovered from her indisposition, the President devoted some thought to his hosts, for on the fourth morning he sent black Christopher, his body servant, to summon the Clarkes. They found George Washington by the kitchen fire, shaven and powdered and in immaculate dress, his stern features composed.

"I am told, Farmer Clarke, that you and your good wife refuse reimbursement for the livestock you have slaughtered in the accommodation of our large company."

"You're my President, Sir," said Simeon. "I wouldn't take money."

"We—we wouldn't take money, Your Worship," stammered Sarah.

"Nevertheless, Lady Washington and I would acknowledge your hospitality in some kind. If you give me leave, I shall plant with my own hands a grove of oak saplings behind your house. And beneath one of the saplings I propose to bury two of my personal possessions." Washington's eyes twinkled ever so slightly. "It is my birthday—I feel a venturesome spirit. Come, Farmer Clarke and Mistress Clarke, would you like that?"

"What—what were they?" choked James Ezekiel Patch, the Washington collector. He was pale.

Martha Clarke replied, "The sword at Washington's side, in its white leather scabbard, and a silver coin the President carried in a secret pocket."

"Silver *coin*?" breathed Baroness Tchek, the rare coin dealer. "What kind of coin, Miss Clarke?"

"The *Diary* calls it 'a half disme'—with an *s*," replied Martha Clarke, frowning. "I guess that's the way they spelled dime in those days. The book's full of queer spellings."

"A United States of America half disme?" asked the Baroness in a very odd way.

"That's what it says, Baroness."

"And this was in 1791?"

"Yes."

The Baroness snorted, beginning to rise. "I thought your story was too impossibly romantic, young woman. The United States Mint didn't begin to strike off half dismes until 1792!"

"Half dismes or any other U. S. coinage, I believe," said Ellery. "How come, Miss Clarke?"

"It was an experimental coin," said Miss Clarke coolly. "The *Diary* isn't clear as to whether it was the Mint which struck it off, or some private agency—maybe Washington himself didn't tell Simeon—but the President did say to Simeon that the half disme in his pocket had been coined from silver he himself had furnished and had been presented to him as a keepsake."

"There's a half disme with a story like that behind it in the possession of The American Numismatic Society," muttered the Baroness, "but it's definitely called one of the earliest coins struck off by the Mint. It's possible, I suppose, that in 1791, the preceding year, some specimen coins may have been struck off—"

"Possible my foot," said Miss Clarke. "It's so. The *Diary* says so. I imagine President Washington was pretty interested in the coins to be issued by the new country he was head of."

"Miss Clarke, I—I want that half disme. I mean—I'd like to buy it from you," said the Baroness.

"And I," said Mr. Patch carefully, "would like to ah . . . purchase Washington's sword."

"The *Diary,"* moaned Professor Shaw. "I'll buy *The Diary of Simeon Clarke* from you, Miss Clarke!"

"I'll be happy to sell it to you, Professor Shaw—as I said, I found it in the attic and I have it locked up in a highboy in the parlor at home. But as for the other two things . . ." Martha Clarke paused, and Ellery looked delighted. He thought he knew what was coming. "I'll sell you the sword, Mr. Patch. and you the half disme, Baroness Tchek, provided—" and now Miss Clarke turned her clear eyes on Ellery "—provided you, Mr. Queen, will be kind enough to find them!"

And there was the farmhouse in the frosty Pennsylvania morning, set in the barren winter acres, and looking as bleak as only a little Revolutionary house with a mortgage on its head can look in the month of February.

"There's an apple orchard over there," said Nikki as they got out of Ellery's car. "But where's the grove of oaks? I don't see any!" And then she added sweetly, "Do you, Ellery?"

Ellery's lips tightened. They tightened further when his solo on the front-door knocker brought no response.

"Let's go around," he said briefly; and Nikki preceded him with cheerful step.

Behind the house there was a barn, and beyond the barn there was comfort, at least for Ellery. For beyond the barn there were twelve ugly holes in the earth, and beside each hole lay either a freshly felled oak tree and its stump, or an ancient stump by itself, freshly uprooted. On one of the stumps sat an old man in earth-stained blue jeans, smoking a corncob pugnaciously.

"Tobias Clarke?" asked Ellery.

"Yump."

"I'm Ellery Queen. This is Miss Porter. Your daughter visited me in New York yesterday—"

"Know all about it."

"May I ask where Martha is?"

"Station. Meetin' them there other folks." Tobias Clarke spat and looked away—at the holes. "Don't know what ye're all comin' down here for. Wasn't nothin' under them oaks. Dug 'em all up t'other day. Trees that were standin' and the stumps of the ones that'd fallen years back. Look at them holes. Hired hand and me dug down most to China. Washin'ton's Grove, always been called. Now look at it. Firewood—for someone else, I guess."

There was iron bitterness in his tone. "We're losin' this farm, Mister, unless . . ." And Tobias Clarke stopped. "Well, maybe we won't," he said. "There's always that there book Martha found."

"Professor Shaw, the rare book collector, offered your daughter four thousand dollars for it if he's satisfied with it, Mr. Clarke," said Nikki.

"So she told me last night when she got back from New York," said Tobias Clarke. "Four thousand—and we need twelve."

"Well," said Nikki sadly to Ellery, "that's that." She hoped Ellery would get into the car and drive back to New York—immediately.

But Ellery showed no disposition to be sensible. "Perhaps, Mr. Clarke, some trees died in the course of time and just disappeared, stumps, roots, and all. Martha"—Martha!—"said the *Diary* doesn't mention the exact number Washington planted here."

"Look at them holes. Twelve of 'em, ain't there? In a triangle. Man plants trees in a triangle, he plants trees in a triangle. Ye don't see no place between holes big enough for another tree, do ye? Anyways, there was the same distance between all the trees. No, sir, Mister, twelve was all there was ever, and I looked under all twelve."

"What's the extra tree doing in the center of the triangle? You haven't uprooted that one, Mr. Clarke."

Tobias Clarke spat once more. "Don't know much about trees, do ye? That's a cherry saplin' I set in myself six years ago. Ain't got nothin' to do with George Washington."

Nikki tittered.

"If you'd sift the earth in those holes—"

"I sifted it. Look, Mister, either somebody dug that stuff up a hundred years ago or the whole yarn's a Saturday night whopper. Which it most likely is. There's Martha now with them other folks." And Tobias Clarke added, spitting again, "Don't let me be keepin' ye."

"It reveals Washington rather—er—out of character," said James Ezekiel Patch that evening.

They were sitting about the fire in the parlor, as heavy with gloom as with Miss Clarke's dinner; and that, at least in Miss Porter's view, was heavy indeed. Baroness Tchek wore the expression of one who is trapped in a cave; there was no further train until morning, and she had not yet resigned herself to a night in a farmhouse bed.

The better part of the day had been spent poring over *The Diary of Simeon Clarke,* searching for a clue to the buried Washingtonia. But there was no clue; the pertinent passage referred merely to "a Triangle of Oake Trees behinde the red Barn, which His Excellency the President did plant with his own Hands, as he had promis'd me, and then did burie his Sworde and the Half Disme for his Pleasure in a Case of copper beneathe one of the Oakes, the which, he said (the Case), had been fashion'd by Mr. Revere of Boston who is experimenting with this Mettle in his Furnasses."

"How out of character, Mr. Patch?" asked Ellery.

"Washington wasn't given to romanticism," said the large man dryly. "No folderol about him. I don't know of anything in his life which prepares us for such a yarn as this. I'm beginning to think—"

"But Professor Shaw himself says the *Diary* is no forgery!" cried Martha Clarke.

"Oh, the book's authentic enough." Professor Shaw seemed unhappy. "But it may simply be a literary hoax, Miss Clarke. The woods are full of them. I'm afraid that unless the story is confirmed by the discovery of that copper case with its contents . . ."

"Oh, dear," said Nikki impulsively; and for a moment she was sorry for Martha Clarke, she really was.

But Ellery said, "I believe it. Pennsylvania farmers in 1791 weren't given to literary hoaxes, Professor Shaw. As for Washington, Mr. Patch—no man can be so rigidly consistent. And with his wife just recovering from an illness—on his own birthday . . ." And Ellery fell silent again.

Almost immediately he leaped from his chair. "Mr. Clarke!"

Tobias stirred from his dark corner. "What?"

"Did you ever hear your father or grandfather—anyone in your family—talk of *another barn behind the house?*"

Martha stared at him. Then she cried, "Papa, that's it! It was a different barn, in a different place, and the original Washington's Grove was cut down, or died—"

"Nope," said Tobias Clarke. "Never was but this one barn. Still got some of its original timbers. Ye can see the date burned into the crosstree—1761."

Nikki was up early. A steady *hack-hack-hack* borne on the frosty air woke her. She peered out of her back window, the coverlet up to her nose, to see Mr. Ellery Queen against the dawn, like a pioneer, wielding an ax powerfully.

Nikki dressed quickly, shivering, flung her mink-dyed muskrat over her shoulders, and ran downstairs, out of the house, and around it past the barn.

"Ellery! What do you think you're doing? It's practically the middle of the night!"

"Chopping," said Ellery, chopping.

"There's *mountains* of firewood stacked against the barn," said Nikki. "Really, Ellery, I think this is carrying a flirtation too far." Ellery did not reply. "And anyway, there's something—something gruesome and indecent about chopping up trees that George Washington planted. It's vandalism."

"Just a thought," panted Ellery, pausing for a moment. "A hundred and fifty-odd years is a long time. For instance—"

"The copper case," breathed Nikki visibly. "The roots grew *around* it. It's *in* one of these stumps!"

"Now you're functioning," said Ellery, and he raised the ax again.

He was still at it two hours later, when Martha Clarke announced breakfast.

At 11:30 A.M. Nikki returned from driving the Professor, the Baroness, and James Ezekiel Patch to the railroad station. She found Mr. Queen seated before the fire in the kitchen in his undershirt, while Martha Clarke caressed his naked right arm.

"Oh!" said Nikki faintly. "I *beg* your pardon."

"Where you going, Nikki?" said Ellery irritably. "Come in. Martha's rubbing liniment into my biceps."

"He's not very accustomed to chopping wood, is he?" asked Martha Clarke in a cheerful voice.

"Reduced those foul 'oakes' to splinters," groaned Ellery. "Martha, ouch!"

"I should think you'd be satisfied *now*," said Nikki coldly. "I suggest we imitate Patch, Shaw, and the Baroness, Ellery—there's a 3:05. We can't impose on Miss Clarke's hospitality forever."

To Nikki's horror Martha Clarke chose this moment to burst into tears.

"Martha!"

Nikki felt like leaping on her and shaking the cool look back into her perfidious eyes.

"Here—here, now, Martha." That's right, thought Nikki contemptuously. Embrace her in front of me! "It's those three rats. Running out that way! Don't worry—I'll find that sword and half disme for you yet."

"You'll never find them," sobbed Martha, wetting Ellery's undershirt. "Because they're not here. They *never* were here. When you s-stop to think of it . . . *burying* that coin, his sword . . . if the story were true, he'd have given them to Simeon and Sarah . . ."

"Not necessarily," said Ellery. "The old boy had a sense of history, Martha. They all did in those days. They knew they were men of destiny and that the eyes of posterity were upon them. Burying 'em is *just* what Washington would have done!"

"Do you really th-think so?" Martha sniffled. "But even if he did bury them, it doesn't stand to reason that Simeon and Sarah would have let them *stay* buried. They'd have dug that copper box up like rabbits the minute G-George turned his back."

"Two simple countryfolk?" cried Ellery. "Salt of the earth? The new American earth? Disregard the wishes of His Mightiness, George Washington, First President of the United States? Are you out of your mind? And anyway, what would Simeon do with a dress sword?"

Beat it into a plowshare, thought

Nikki—*that's* what he'd do.

"And that half disme. How much could it have been worth in 1791? Martha, they're here under your farm somewhere. You wait—"

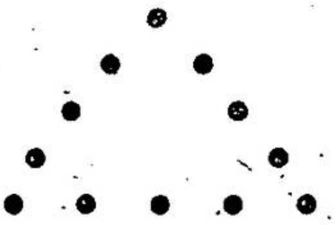
"I wish I could b-believe it—"

"Shucks, child. Stop crying—"

From the door Miss Porter said stiffly, "You might put your shirt back on, Superman, before you catch pneumonia."

Mr. Queen prowled about the Clarke acres for the remainder of that day, his nose at a low altitude. He spent some time in the barn. He devoted at least twenty minutes to each of the twelve holes in the earth. He reinspected the oaken wreckage of his axwork, like a paleontologist examining an ancient petrifaction for the impression of a dinosaur foot.

He measured off the distance between the holes; and, for a moment, a faint tremor of emotion shook him. George Washington had been a surveyor in his youth; here was evidence that his passion for exactitude had not wearied with the years. As far as Ellery could make out, the twelve oaks had been set into the earth at exactly equal distances, in an equilateral triangle.



It was at this point that Ellery sat down on the seat of a cultivator behind the barn, wondering at his suddenly accelerated circulation. Little memories were knocking at the door. And as he opened to admit them, it was as if he were admitting a personality.

It was, of course, at this time that the sense of personal conflict first obtruded. He had merely to shut his eyes in order to materialize a tall, large-featured man carefully pacing off the distances between twelve points—pacing them off in a sort of objective challenge to the unborn future.

The man Washington had from the beginning possessed an affinity for numbers. It had remained with him all his life. To count things—not so much for the sake of the things, perhaps, as for the counting—had been of the utmost importance to him. As a boy in Mr. Williams's school in Westmoreland he excelled in arithmetic. Long division, subtraction, weights and measures—to calculate cords of wood and pecks of peas, pints and gallons and avoirdupois—young George delighted in these as other boys delighted in horseplay.

As a man, he merely directed his passion into the channel of his possessions. Through his possessions he apparently satisfied his curious need for enumeration. He was not content simply to keep accounts of the acreage he owned, its yield, his slaves, his pounds and pence. Ellery recalled the extraordinary case of Washington and the seed.

George Washington once calculated the number of seeds in a pound troy weight of red clover. Not appeased by the statistics on red clover, Washington then went to work on a pound of timothy seed. His conclusions were: 71,000 and 298,000. His appetite unsatisfied, he thereupon fell upon the problem of New River grass. Here he tackled a calculation worthy of his prowess: his mathematical labors produced the great, pacifying figure of 844,800.

This man was so obsessed with numbers, Ellery thought, staring at the ruins of Washington's Grove, that he counted the windows in each house of his Mount Vernon estate and the number of "Paynes" in each window of each house, and then triumphantly recorded the exact number of each in his own handwriting.

It was like a hunger, requiring periodic appeasement. In 1747, as a boy of 15, George Washington drew "A Plan of Major Law: Washingtons Turnip Field as Survey'd by me." In 1786, at the age of 54, General Washington, the most famous man in the world, occupied himself with determining the exact elevation of his piazza above the Potomac's high-water mark. No doubt he experienced a warmer satisfaction thereafter for knowing that when he sat on his piazza looking down on the river he was sitting exactly 124 feet10½ inches above it.

And in 1791, as President of the United States, Ellery mused, he was striding about right here, setting saplings into the ground, twelve of them in an equilateral triangle, and beneath one of them he buried a copper case containing his sword and the half disme coined from his own silver. Beneath one of them. . . .

But it was not beneath one of them. Or had it been? And had long ago been dug up by a Clarke? But the story had apparently died with Simeon and Sarah. On the other hand . . .

Ellery found himself irrationally reluctant to conclude the obvious. George Washington's lifelong absorption with figures kept intruding. Twelve trees, equidistant, in an equilateral triangle.

"What is it?" he kept asking himself, almost angrily. "Why isn't it satisfying me?"

And then, in the gathering dusk, a very odd explanation insinuated itself. *Because it wouldn't have satisfied him!*

That's silly, Ellery said to himself abruptly. It has all the earmarks of a satisfying experience. There is no more satisfying figure in all geometry than an equilateral triangle. It is closed, symmetrical, definite, a whole and balanced and finished thing.

But it wouldn't have satisfied George Washington . . . for all its symmetry and perfection.

Then perhaps there is a symmetry and perfection beyond the cold beauty of figures?

At this point, Ellery began to question his own postulates . . .

They found him at 10:30, crouched on the cultivator seat, numb and staring.

He permitted himself to be led into the house; he suffered Nikki to subject him to the indignity of having his shoes and socks stripped off and his frozen feet rubbed to life; he ate Martha Clarke's dinner—all with a detachment and indifference which alarmed the girls and even made old Tobias look uneasy.

"If it's going to have this effect on him," began Martha, and then she said, "Ellery, give it up. Forget it." But she had to shake him before he heard her.

He shook his head. "They're there."

"Where?" cried the girls simultaneously.

"In Washington's Grove."

"Ye found 'em!" croaked Tobias Clarke, half rising.

"No."

The Clarkes and Nikki exchanged glances.

"Then how can you be so certain they're buried there, Ellery?" asked Nikki gently.

Ellery looked bewildered. "Darned if I know *how* I know," he said, and he even laughed a little. "Maybe George Washington told me." Then he stopped laughing and went into the firelit parlor and—pointedly—slid the doors shut.

At ten minutes past midnight Martha Clarke gave up the contest.

"Isn't he *ever* going to come out of there?" she said, yawning.

"You never can tell what Ellery will do," replied Nikki.

"Well, I can't keep my eyes open another minute."

"Funny," said Nikki. "I'm not the least bit sleepy."

"You city girls."

"You country girls."

They laughed. Then they stopped laughing, and for a moment there was no sound in the kitchen but the patient sentry-walk of the grandfather clock and the snores of Tobias from above.

"Well," said Martha. Then she said, "I just *can't.* Are you staying up, Nikki?"

"For a little while. You go to bed, Martha."

"Yes. Well. Good night."

"Good night, Martha."

At the door Martha turned suddenly. "Did he say *George Washington told him?"*

"Yes."

Martha went rather quickly up the stairs.

Nikki waited fifteen minutes. Then she tiptoed to the foot of the stairs and listened. She heard an uneasy moan from the direction of Martha's bedroom, as if she were dreaming an unwholesome dream.

Nikki set her jaw grimly, went to the parlor doors, and slid them open.

Ellery was on his knees before the fire. His elbows were resting on the floor. His face was propped in his hands.

"Ellery, what on earth—?"

"Nikki. I thought you'd gone to bed long ago." In the firelight his face was haggard.

"But what have you been *doing?* You look exhausted!"

"I am. I've been wrestling with a man who could bend a horseshoe with his naked hands. A very strong man. In more ways than one."

"What are you talking about? Who?"

"George Washington. Go to bed, Nikki."

"George . . . Washington?"

"Go to bed."

". . . *Wrestling* with him?"

"Trying to break through his defenses. Get into his mind. It's not an easy mind to get into. He's been dead such a long time—that makes the difference. The dead are stubborn, Nikki. Aren't you going to bed?"

Nikki backed out shivering.

The house *was* icy.

It was even icier when an inhuman bellow brought Nikki out of bed with a leap.

But it was only Ellery.

He was somewhere up the hall, in the first glacial light of dawn, hammering on Martha Clarke's door.

"Martha. *Martha!* Wake up, and tell me where I can find a book in this damned house! A biography of Washington—a history of the United States—an almanac. . . *anything!*"

The parlor fire had long since given up the ghost. Nikki and Martha in wrappers, and Tobias Clarke in an ancient bathrobe over his long underwear, stood around shivering and bewildered as a disheveled, demonic Ellery leafed eagerly through a 1921 edition of *The Farmer's Fact Book and Complete Compendium.*

"Here it is!" The words shot out of his mouth like bullets.

"What is it, Ellery?"

"What on earth are you looking for?"

"He's loony, I tell ye!"

Ellery turned with a look of ineffable peace, closing the book.

"That's it," he said.

"What's it?"

"Vermont. The State of Vermont."

"Vermont . . .?"

"*Vermont?*"

"Vermont. What in the crawlin' creepers has Vermont got to do with—?"

"Vermont," said Ellery with a tired smile, "did not enter the Union until March fourth, 1791. So that proves it, don't you see?"

"Proves *what?*" shrieked Nikki.

"Where George Washington buried his sword and half disme."

"Because," said Ellery in the rapidly lightening dawn behind the barn, "Vermont was the fourteenth State to do so. The *fourteenth*. Tobias, would you get me an ax, please?"

"An ax," mumbled Tobias. He shuffled away, shaking his head.

"Come on, Ellery, I'm d-dying of c-cold!" chattered Nikki, dancing up and down before the cultivator.

"Ellery," said Martha Clarke piteously, "I don't understand *any* of this."

"It's very simple, Martha—oh, thank you, Tobias—as simple," said Ellery, "as simple arithmetic. Numbers, my dears—numbers tell this remarkable story. Numbers and their influence on our first President who was, above all things, a number-man. That was my key. I merely had to discover the lock to fit it into. Vermont was the lock. And the door's open."

Nikki seated herself on the cultivator. You had to give Ellery his head in a situation like this; you couldn't drive him for beans. Well, she thought grudgingly, seeing how pale and how tired-looking he was after a night's wrestling with George Washington, he's earned it.

"The number was wrong," said Ellery solemnly, leaning on Tobias's ax. "Twelve trees. Washington apparently planted twelve trees—Simeon Clarke's *Diary* never did mention the number twelve, but the evidence seemed unquestionable—there were twelve oaks in an equilateral triangle, each one an equal distance from its neighbor.

"And yet . . . I felt that *twelve* oaks couldn't be, perfect as the triangle was. Not if they were planted by George Washington. Not on February the twenty-second, New Style, in the year of our Lord 1791.

"Because on February the twenty-second, 1791—in fact, until March the fourth, when Vermont entered the Union to swell its original number by one—there was *another* number in the United States so important, so revered, so much a part of the common speech and the common living—and dying—that it was more than a number; it was a solemn and sacred thing; almost not a number at all.

"It overshadowed all other numbers like the still-unborn Paul Bunyan. It was memorialized on the new American flag in the number of its stars and the number of its stripes. It was a number of which George Washington was the standard-bearer!—the head and only recently the strong right arm of the new Republic which had been born out of the blood and muscle of its integers.

"It was a number which was in the hearts and minds and mouths of all Americans.

"No. If George Washington, who was not merely the living symbol of all this but carried with him that extraordinary compulsion toward numbers which characterized his whole temperament besides, had wished to plant a number of oak trees to commemorate a birthday visit in the year 1791 . . . he would have, he could have, selected only one number out of all the mathematical trillions at his command—*the number thirteen.*"

The sun was looking over the edge of Pennsylvania at Washington's Grove.

"George Washington planted thirteen trees here that day, and under one of them he buried Paul Revere's copper case. Twelve of the trees he arranged in an equilateral triangle, and we know that the historic treasure was not under any of the twelve. Therefore he must have buried the case under the thirteenth—a thirteenth oak sapling which grew to oakhood and, some time during the past century and a half, withered and died and vanished, vanished so utterly that it left no trace.

"Where would Washington have planted that thirteenth oak? Because beneath the spot where it once stood—there lies the copper case containing his sword and the first coin to be struck off in the new United States."

And Ellery glanced tenderly at the cherry sapling which Tobias Clarke had set into the earth in the middle of Washington's Grove six years before.

"Washington the surveyor, the geometer, the man whose mind cried out for integral symmetries? Obviously, in only one place: *In the center of the triangle.* Any other place would be utterly and absolutely unthinkable."

And Ellery hefted Tobias's ax and strode toward the six-year-old tree. He raised the ax.

But suddenly he lowered it, turned, and said in a rather startled way, "See here! Isn't today . . .?"

"Washington's Birthday," said Nikki.

Ellery grinned and began to chop down the cherry tree.

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Jane Speed keeps improving with each new story she writes. Her first story, "According to Plan" (EQMM, March 1963) had pace, shape, and impact. Her second story, "The Listening Game" (EQMM, December 1963) was a long stride forward—and both stories, her first and second, were included by Anthony Boucher in his Honor Roll of the best detective stories of 1963. Her third story, "The Freya of Fire Island" (EQMM, September 1964) had a firmer style, was sharper in observation, and had deeper insight . . . And now her fourth story: about a nervous, harassed mother of two small children, the wife of a demanding, sarcastic, belittling husband—a woman who desperately tries to cope with the tensions and pressures of everyday family problems . . . a superb character study.

END OF THE DAY

by JANE SPEED

WHEN RUTH FINALLY UNlocked the door to the apartment and pushed the children, grubby from their day at the zoo, into the dim hallway, she saw with dismay that the kitchen clock said 5:20. Her watch had stopped again, of course. ("You do have to wind the things, Ruth dear," George always said with amused exasperation.) Too late, she set and wound it now.

But she couldn't just stand there. George was due home at 6:00 and he liked his dinner hot and on the table the minute he came in. Hastily she lit the oven, steered the children into the living room, and turned on the television. Then she dashed back to the kitchen, pulled the potatoes out of the bin, scrubbed them, and thrust them into the hot oven.

She opened the refrigerator door and saw with relief that she had at least remembered to take the meat out of the freezing compartment before they'd left in the morning. She hadn't really been quite sure. It had worried her all the way home. Each morning there were so many things she was supposed to do, and fully intended to do, but somehow by the end of the day it was difficult to remember whether she'd actually done them or just thought about doing them. ("If you'd just *plan* your day a little, Ruth dear," George would say.)

She sighed as she clattered a large

frying pan out onto the top of the stove. She lit the burner and put the meat into the pan to brown. Then she pulled out the drawer beneath the cupboard to get a tablecloth, and the sight of the clean smooth linens stirred some uneasy recollection inside her. George's shirts! She'd forgotten to pick up his shirts from the laundry!

She looked at the clock again. Almost 5:30. With luck she might make it to the laundry and back by twenty to 6:00. She turned the fire low under the meat, put a cover on the sizzling pan, and hurried into the living room to collect the children.

Small Mary was sitting on the floor, oblivious of everything but the cartoon antics on the television screen. But where was Timmy? Ruth stood for a second looking helplessly around the room. Then her hand flew to her throat. The bedroom! Oh, surely not? She could still feel the sting of George's words when he had come home one evening to discover that the children had disturbed some papers he'd left lying on the bedside table. ("I do think, Ruth, this is one place you could manage to keep the children out of. Surely you can exercise some discipline over them, can't you?") And she had tried. Oh, truly she had tried. Their bedroom door was always kept closed and the children were reprimanded if they made so much as a move to open it.

She ran around the hall to the bedrooms. Her heart sank as she glanced into the children's room. Timmy was not there. The door to the other bedroom was closed. But she stood motionless in front of it, unable to bring herself to turn the knob and look inside.

Suddenly Timmy emerged from the bathroom, a proud smile on his face, his overalls dragging. Ruth laughed aloud with relief and gave him a quick hug as she bent down to fasten the overalls. Then, remembering with a start what she still had to do, she took him by the hand and hurried back to the living room, pulled the protesting Mary away from the television, and herded them both out the door and down in the elevator.

The laundry was just around the corner. But by the time Ruth, clutching the precious bundle of shirts, half dragged the children back to the apartment it was ten minutes to 6:00. Why did everything always take longer than she thought it would? And the children were so hopelessly dirty. Quickly she wet a rag and did a makeshift job of cleaning their hands and faces, then sent them back into the living room. She thought nervously of George's annoyance at coming in and finding them "glued to the television." But she had had them out all day. That should count for something.

She was just sprinkling dressing over the hastily chopped salad when

Timmy reappeared in the kitchen and deposited Mary's doll cart at Ruth's feet. He held one of the wheels in his hand and began tugging at her skirt.

"Fix, Mommy," he said.

"Oh, Timmy, not now. I haven't time," said Ruth desperately.

But even as she spoke, she cast a quick appraising glance at the cart. The wheel itself was not broken and by some miracle the cap still clung to it. All it would take really were a couple of good whacks with the hammer. She sighed and gave in. She'd get him out from under foot sooner by fixing the cart than by arguing about it.

She pulled open the tool drawer and rummaged through it. Where, oh, where was the hammer? Screwdriver, pliers—but no hammer. Where had she used it last? That's what George would say. ("A little calm logic, Ruth dear, that's all it takes. Just think where you used it last and that's where it will be.")

She had used it to hang the two prints over the bed—but that had been a few days ago—there was something else since then, she was sure of it.

As she cast about in her mind trying to recall, her eye caught the clock. One minute to 6:00. She jerked herself up impatiently. She had no time now for calm logic or fixing toys. She banged the drawer shut and put the doll cart and the wheel firmly into a corner.

"I'll have to do it later, Timmy," she said. And Timmy toddled out of the kitchen, disappointed.

Ruth turned off the oven, took the potatoes out, slit them, and put them into a serving dish on top of the stove. Then she turned off the fire under the meat.

"Please," she thought prayerfully as she set the table, "just let him be five minutes late. Just this once."

She hurried back to the kitchen and picked up the salad and potatoes and took them into the dining room. The meat she'd leave till George arrived. Frowning, she surveyed the table to be sure she hadn't forgotten anything. Then, with a sigh, her whole body relaxed a little—as though her tension had been holding George off and now he was released to come through the door.

But he did not come.

By 6:20 Ruth was beginning to worry that the potatoes were cold, the salad was limp, and the meat drying up in the pan. At a quarter to 7:00 she fed the children and put the remaining potatoes back into the still slightly warm oven and the salad into the refrigerator.

She hurried the children through their baths, one ear cocked for the sound of the front door. And by the time she kissed them good night and went out of their room a new little fear had begun to prick the back of her mind. *Had* George told her this morning that he would be late for dinner tonight? Oh, she couldn't be as forgetful as all that . . . could she?

She stood in the hall trying, trying desperately to recall. Was there something? Was there?

But it was no use. The morning seemed so far away and her tired mind simply refused to be pushed back beyond the ice cream, the sticky hands, and the animal smells of the zoo.

She walked wearily into the living room and sank into a chair by the window. It was dark outside, but the street light shone in and she couldn't keep her eyes off her watch.

At what point, Ruth began to wonder nervously, was one supposed to call the police? "My husband is almost three hours late to dinner," she recited experimentally. Would they laugh at her?

And George. Suppose there was a perfectly ordinary explanation for all this. Perhaps he'd tried to phone her while they were at the zoo today—and he walked in and found that she'd—

Her face flushed in anticipation of his anger. ("Oh, for heaven's sake, Ruth! I'm late for dinner and you have to call out the whole police force. If you'd just manage to be home sometimes during the day, you'd have got my call and there wouldn't have been all this fuss.")

She wished she could talk to someone, though. She had no close friends, not really. She spoke to other mothers in the park sometimes, but she didn't even know most of their last names. Perhaps Mr. Kassel, George's boss? He lived in the Bronx somewhere. She wasn't sure of his telephone number but she could, she supposed, ask the operator. She speculated idly on what she would say to Mr. Kassel—but still she sat on in the chair.

It was even darker now. She reached over and snapped on the light. At the same instant the telephone bell cut through the apartment like an alarm. Her hand jerked so sharply that she almost knocked over the lamp. She pulled herself up, trembling, and stumbled into the hall.

"Yes, hello?" she said breathlessly into the phone.

"Mrs. Lowbeck? Ralph Kassel."

"Oh. Oh, yes. You've called about George."

"Been calling on and off all day but I couldn't get any answer." Mr. Kassell sounded peevish.

"I'm sorry—I took the children to the zoo." Then it occurred to her to wonder why Mr. Kassel was calling. "George is all right, isn't he? Nothing's happened?"

"Isn't he home?" The question seemed to shoot out of the receiver.

"N-no. I—I had dinner ready at six, but he hasn't come home yet."

It must have been a full half minute before Mr. Kassel spoke again. "Well. Well, I don't know what to think. George didn't show up at work today either, Mrs. Lowbeck."

Ruth sat silent, trying to assimilate this new information. George had missed only two days of work in the past fifteen years. It was a point of special pride with him.

The voice at the other end of the wire was talking again. ". . . thought, of course, he must have gone out of town on some family emergency. But it did seem funny he wouldn't have called in to let us know. Not like him—not like him at all." Mr. Kassel paused. "He left for work at the usual time this morning . . . Mrs. Lowbeck?"

Ruth pulled her thoughts back to the conversation. "Y-yes. George always leaves at eight fifteen."

"Hmmm. Well, this puts things in quite a different light. You don't have any idea where he might have gone?"

"No," said Ruth faintly.

"Well. Mrs. Lowbeck." Mr. Kassel cleared his throat. "I really do think, under the circumstances, that the police ought to be notified."

"Yes."

"Just as a matter of routine, of course," he hastened to add, and bumbled on with further reassurances.

But Ruth had stopped listening after the word "police," and it was not until she heard Mr. Kassel sigh and clear his throat again that she realized he had been silent for several seconds.

"Uh— Mrs. Lowbeck," he said finally.

"Yes?" Why, she wondered helplessly, couldn't she say anything but yes and no?

"Would you like me to check with them—with the police, I mean."

"Oh, would you?" Relief flooded her voice. "Thank you so much," she breathed.

"What I'd better do is come over to your place and if he still isn't home, then I can call them from there. Now, you just sit tight and try not to worry too much. Very likely," he added with forced heartiness, "there's some simple explanation that just hasn't occurred to us."

"Yes. Thank you. Goodbye."

Ruth put the phone back in its cradle but she didn't move from her place beside it. A kind of peace settled over her. Things were out of her hands now. Mr. Kassel would come and call the police, and somehow they would take care of everything.

Her thoughts flickered briefly, uneasily, to the table still set in the dining room and to the ruins of the uneaten dinner in the kitchen. But it seemed important that she devote herself entirely to the business of waiting, so she sat on . . .

She was still sitting there when the doorbell rang nearly an hour later. Instinctively her hand went out to the telephone. Then, realizing it was the door, she stood up, once more alert and trembling.

She smoothed her hair nervously and straightened her dress, wondering if it could possibly, even after all this time, be George. But George, of course, would have his key, she reminded herself as she opened the door.

"Any news?" Mr. Kassel boomed without preliminary.

Ruth shook her head and led him into the living room. She motioned him to the couch and seated herself docilely on a chair opposite.

"I jotted down a brief description of George." Mr. Kassell searched through his pockets and brought out a pen and a crumpled envelope. "I guess that's the sort of thing they'll want to know."

He read it to her and Ruth nodded. Yes, she thought that was accurate, and no, George had no identifying marks that she could think of.

"Now," said Mr. Kassel, looking up. "What was he wearing when he left this morning?"

The steady flow of dutiful answers halted and Ruth stared helplessly in front of her, then dropped her eyes. "That's awful," she murmured, "I can't seem to remember exactly."

"Happens." Mr. Kassel smiled sympathetically. "Bet I couldn't tell you right now what my wife had on at breakfast this morning. Don't worry about it. You can check his closet and see which suit is missing."

"Yes, I suppose I—" Ruth began. "Oh—wait. It must have been the gray suit. He wore the blue one yesterday and he got a spot on it at dinner last night and—oh!" She broke off with a gasp.

"Remember something?"

"I was supposed to take the blue suit to the dry cleaner today," said Ruth miserably, "and I forgot."

Mr. Kassel stared at her for a moment, then sighed and wrote down *gray suit*. "Hat?" he prodded.

"Yes," Ruth answered mechanically, her mind still trying to deal with the problem of the forgotten suit. Then, realizing that something more was expected, she added, "Oh—it's gray, too, light gray felt."

"No topcoat, raincoat?"

"Oh, no—I don't think so—it was very warm today."

Mr. Kassel nodded, frowned at his notes a second longer, then tucked his pen back into his pocket. "Well," he said, "I guess that's about all the information we can give them. The police, I mean."

Still, he hesitated as though somehow dissatisfied. He looked closely at Ruth again, then asked suddenly, "Mrs. Lowbeck, did you go to the door with George this morning or were you maybe busy in the kitchen or something like that?"

Ruth sat silent trying to sort out *this morning* from all the other mornings she'd seen George go off to work. "I'm—not sure," she said at last.

"Then it is possible he could have been carrying a suitcase and you didn't notice it?"

Ruth looked at him in blank astonishment. "Why would he have a suitcase?"

"Well." Mr. Kassel ran his hand

around the back of his neck. "If he'd planned to go out of town, he'd probably have taken a suitcase." He paused, then asked, "You're quite sure, Mrs. Lowbeck, that he didn't mention anything to you about going out of town today? Maybe he said something about it last night and it slipped your mind?"

"Oh, no," Ruth protested. "I'm sure he didn't say anything like that." She managed, with great effort, to keep her face composed, but her thoughts were racing wildly. What if he had said something? Perhaps she was supposed to have let Mr. Kassel know. George would be furious with her . . . Oh, but it didn't make sense. Where would George go that Mr. Kassel wouldn't know about? "Where would he go?" she echoed her thought aloud.

Mr. Kassel shrugged. "I don't suppose you happened to notice today whether any of his clothing or luggage was missing?"

Ruth shook her head.

"Well." He stood up, brisk again at the prospect of some kind of action. "I think it would be a good idea to check on that right now. No sense calling in the police until we know exactly where we stand."

Ruth nodded, but made no move to rise.

"I'll check with you if you like," Mr. Kassel encouraged her.

Ruth pulled herself up from the chair and showed him the way around the hall. At the bedroom door she stopped again, puzzled. Now, wasn't that silly? She couldn't think what she had come there for.

Mr. Kassel pushed past her impatiently and opened the door. He felt for the switch and flipped on the overhead light.

The sudden brightness jabbed at Ruth's memory, starting up a flutter of recollections. She sank back against the wall, trying to catch at the recollection she wanted.

"What the devil—" Mr. Kassel spluttered beside her. Ruth wished he wouldn't make so much noise when she was trying to think. But he went right on talking angrily as he disappeared into the bedroom. "George Lowbeck! Is this some kind of joke? I've been—oh, my God!"

For a long time there was just the pounding, light-filled silence. Ruth held herself motionless against the wall, hoping Mr. Kassel would come out soon because there was something she wanted to tell him before it slipped away again.

"Mrs. Lowbeck . . ." Mr. Kassel's voice sounded raspy and far away. Then he stumbled into the doorway, clutching at the side of it with both hands. "Mrs. Lowbeck . . . Mrs.—"

Ruth leaned toward him eagerly. "I remember now." With shy pride she made him a gift of her small accomplishment. "I remember where I left the hammer."

A necklace of beautiful sparkling crystals—but any one of them meant agonizing death . . . an unusual story.

THE POISON NECKLACE

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

THE EXHIBIT AT THE SCIENCE FAIR which fascinated most visitors was the deadly necklace fashioned by Joyce Ledderby.

Joyce, a high school student of chemistry, had made it of crystallized poisons. The crystals were beautiful—green, red, yellow, orange. But within their beauty was death; they were formed from ferrocyanides of sodium and potassium, of copper acetate, nickel ammonium sulfate, and dichlorate of potassium. She had handled the poisons with extreme care, using tweezers to twist silver wire around each crystal and arrange them into the gorgeous circlet. Any one of the crystals, worn next to a living skin, would mean an agonizing death within minutes or, at the most, hours. Now they lay, mounted on black velvet, in a case under a glass lid.

And on the last day of the Science Fair someone had managed to tilt the glass unobserved and walk off with the necklace.

Joyce, coming to pick up her exhibit, found only the empty case. Dismayed and frightened, she reported her discovery to Mr. Randall, the manager of the Fair.

"A card was right by it," she stammered, "telling exactly what the crystals were made of, and warning people they were dangerous even to touch."

Mr. Randall frowned. He had not wanted to accept the exhibit in the first place, but had been persuaded by Joyce's enthusiastic chemistry teacher.

"There's only one thing to do," he decided. "We must alert the police at once. They can have announcements made on radio and television and even on movie screens, before we could possibly get a notice in any of the papers. When are you sure the necklace was last here?"

"I've come every day after school," said Joyce. "It was here at five o'clock yesterday."

"And the Fair was open last night, and all morning and afternoon till now. I've been too busy to be out on the floor at all."

Joyce burst into tears.

The Lieutenant in charge of the Burglary Detail to whom Randall was finally shunted took a long time to realize how alarming the situation was; he had never studied chemistry. When at last he got the full picture he came up with another idea: every hospital in the city, and every physician, would be alerted to watch out for a victim of the poison necklace.

It was all in vain.

Joyce Ledderby cried herself into exhaustion and was sent home in a cab. The Lieutenant, now thoroughly alarmed, confessed himself stymied. "The thief must be one of three possibilities," he concluded. "An illiterate who couldn't read the card—and what would anyone like that be doing at a Science Fair? Or a complete nut—and the streets are swarming with them. Or a shrewd and cunning murderer who has protected himself and planned a perfect murder."

The Homicide Detail was called into the case. But they were as baffled as the Lieutenant had been.

In the next 24 hours three events occurred. A woman whose bewildered husband had brought her as an anniversary present a necklace of multicolored semiprecious stones had it flung in his face by his hysterical wife, who fled the house and denounced him to the police as an attempted murderer. A hospital reported a two-year-old whose mother said he had "swallowed something"; his throat was badly burned, but X-rays revealed no necklace and his four-year-old sister finally confessed that she had fed the baby boiling soup "to see what he would do." A gang of young hoodlums knocked down an old man in a park that night and rifled his pockets; fortunately a prowl car was passing and scattered them. They dropped their loot as they fled and part of it was a chain of colored stones. "My dead wife's rosary," the old man gasped.

No other clues were developed . . .

The person who had taken the poison necklace could not read the card beside it; he did not go to the movies, and would not have understood the radio and TV warnings. He was a first-grader named Johnny Thayne who had been attracted by the pretty colors and who, when his mother's attention was elsewhere and nobody else was looking, quickly opened the case with a grubby handkerchief in his hand, wrapped the necklace in it, and put the two in his pants pocket. His mother took him away soon afterward, and by the time they got home he had forgotten all about it.

Johnny was at school the next morning when the doorbell rang. It was the man from Good Will Industries for some discarded clothing Mrs. Thayne had ready for them.

"Oh, wait a minute," she said. "I've got something else for you. I noticed last night when I hung my little boy's things up that the slacks he had on are almost worn through. I'll put them in too."

In her hurry not to keep the man standing, she did not go through the pockets.

At the Good Will plant they emptied the pockets before putting the slacks in the washing machine. Out came a stick of gum, two bottle caps, a good luck penny, and a dirty handkerchief with something in it.

Like all Good Will employees, the man in charge of the cleaning department was handicapped. In his case his right hand had been amputated and he wore a steel-and-rubber substitute. It was with this that he drew forth the sparkling necklace.

"Look," he said to his assistant, "do you think this is something valuable, put in by mistake, that we ought to send back?"

"Phone the donor and ask," the assistant suggested. "I'll look up the name for you."

"Why no," Mrs. Thayne answered. "I haven't missed any necklace. If there was anything like that in Johnny's slacks it must be some cheap costume jewelry that he found or traded for with another kid. Just throw it away, or keep it to sell if it's worth anything."

So the chain of pretty poison crystals was given to the woman who handled the glass case full of junk jewelry.

"Oh, isn't that lovely!" she exclaimed. "I think we could charge a dollar for it. I'll put it right in the front of the case."

She reached out for it, then drew back, embarrassed. She had forgotten how sensitive Mr. Barrows was about his artificial hand; he hated to have anyone touch it. Reddening, she opened the case and looked away while he placed it carefully between a trayful of earrings and a string of dim artificial pearls.

At lunchtime two secretaries shopping around among the racks of second-hand clothing paused at the jewelry counter.

"Hey, Arlene, look at that necklace!" one of them said. "Gee, I'd like that! How much is it?"

"A dollar," the saleswoman told her.

The other girl pulled her away. "You crazy, Sandra?" she demanded. "You can get as good as that any day at the five-and-ten for a dollar, and brand-new besides. You said you wanted to look at coats—well, let's look at coats."

Sandra hesitated. "Lemme try it on, anyway," she said. The saleswoman opened the case.

"Oh, come *on*," urged Arlene. "We haven't got all day."

Sandra permitted herself to be led away.

Johnny Thayne came home from school and dashed into the kitchen, where his mother was ironing.

"Hey!" he announced. "I've got a girl! She sits by me in school."

"That's nice, Johnny," Mrs.

Thayne smiled. "Is she a nice girl?"

"She has red hair. Her name's Sally. Can I have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?"

"Why not? You always do."

"Say!" said Johnny, munching. "I just remembered: I'm going to give Sally the beads I—some beads I found somewheres yesterday."

"Beads?"

"Pretty ones—all colors. They were—I picked them up at the—somewheres."

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry!" Mrs. Thayne said. "They must have been in a pocket of your slacks that I gave to the Good Will this morning. They phoned me and I told them they weren't anything of mine and to keep them or throw them away."

Suddenly she did a double take. An item in last night's news program on TV came back to her.

"Oh, my God!" she breathed, and ran to the phone.

"Good Will? This is Mrs. Thayne. Will you connect me with whoever called me this morning about a necklace you found in my son's pocket? Hurry, please, it's urgent." Her voice shook.

She was switched from the head of the cleaning department to the saleswoman at the jewelry counter.

"That necklace? Yes, I know the one you mean. I just sold it for a dollar."

"Sold it? Oh—"

"To an old lady—for a birthday present to her granddaughter, she told me. Was it something you didn't mean us to have?"

"Listen—" No, she mustn't panic the woman; everybody at Good Will was either old or disabled, and for all she knew the clerk might drop dead of heart failure at the news. Mrs. Thayne paused to control her voice. "Do you know who she was?"

"I have no idea—just an old lady who comes in here sometimes. We call her Grandma, because she dresses so old-fashioned—all in black right down to her gloves and shoes. But I don't know her name or where she lives."

Gloves: thank heaven. And she probably wouldn't be trying the necklace on. Could the police—

The saleswoman was speaking again. "She might be here still—it was only five minutes ago."

"Will you look? It's—it's awfully important."

The clerk was a long time coming back to the phone; she was lame and couldn't walk fast.

"I'm sorry. She went out the door before I could reach her. I couldn't see which way she took."

So—the police.

But, try as they could, the police could find no trace of the old lady who had unwittingly bought death for her granddaughter.

Mrs. Kuykendahl was on old age relief. She lived in a tiny room in a shabby rundown hotel, cooked her frugal meals surreptitously on a hot plate, and was often hard put to find bus fare to visit her widowed daughter and the three children her daughter was bringing up by working as a chambermaid.

But Mrs. Kuykendahl had her pride; and when Bertha, her oldest grandchild and her favorite, was going to have her 14th birthday, her grandmother was not going to let it go unmarked. By going without some more in a life made up of going without, she had saved up a dollar for Bertha's present. The poor child never had any luxuries; this time Grandma was going to see that she had something pretty instead of practical.

When she saw that beautiful necklace, and priced at just a dollar, she knew at once that she had found what she was looking for. She was so excited that when the clerk lifted the glass cover of the case, she couldn't wait for her to bring the necklace out, but reached for it herself and held it admiringly in her mended black cotton glove.

"Yes, I'll take it," she said, and dropped it herself into the paper bag the saleswoman held out. She took the sales slip to the cashier, and having no money left to spend, paused only for a wistful glance or two at dresses and coats that would look so nice on one or another of her granddaughters before leaving the store and starting the long walk home.

She would have liked so much to wrap her gift in fancy paper and ribbons, but a dollar will stretch just so far. So she left it in the paper bag to take to Bertha's celebration, just peeping in once or twice to see how pretty it was.

The birthday was on Saturday—a day by which the police were still trying vainly to find the old lady called Grandma. Mrs. Kuykendahl had no TV or radio, and couldn't afford to buy a paper very often.

It was dark before she set out. Her daughter never got home before six, and she didn't want to arrive so early that they would feel bound to give her dinner out of their scanty stock. She got to the transfer point, and just missed the other bus. That meant a 20 minutes' wait on the street corner. Oh, well. Mrs. Kuykendahl was used to patient waiting.

She leaned against the fireplug at the corner, her shabby handbag and the paper bag containing Bertha's present in one gnarled hand, the bus transfer in the other. Her feet hurt. The street lamps were few out here in this residential neighborhood, and the street was empty, unlike the downtown streets that she was used to. Occasionally an auto passed.

She sighed. She wished she were not waiting alone, and she felt relieved when she saw two teen-age boys coming down the street toward the bus stop. They were both smoking; she could see the little lights. A memory crossed the old lady's mind—herself at ten or twelve, and her mother saying to her, "Never be afraid of a man who is smoking as he walks—that means he is a respectable man who will do you no harm." She smiled; that was long before everybody smoked, women as well as men, and when it was cigars or pipes, not what they used to call coffin nails.

The two boys drew nearer.

She watched them uneasily. She didn't much like their looks after all. They were walking so fast and so softly, and it was so dark, and there was nobody else in sight.

Suddenly one was in front of her, one behind. Her arms were pinioned and her hands forced open. She started to scream, and a rough hand clamped over her lips, dislodging her upper plate so that its edge pinched the roof of her mouth.

One of the boys scooped up the handbag and the paper bag from the sidewalk, and the other—the one behind her—pushed her hard between her thin shoulder blades, so that she fell, all hundred pounds and five feet of her, on the curb. When, sick and shaking, she managed to sit up, the two teen-agers had disappeared. She tried to stand up, and her right leg buckled under her. An agonizing pain stabbed her right hip.

People finally did pass, but no one seemed to notice her. Then a man and woman stopped at the corner to wait for the bus. "Please!" moaned old Mrs. Kuykendahe, and half an hour later she was in the Emergency Hospital.

She had given her granddaughter the best birthday present any human being can give another: she had saved her from death.

Sam Sheehan and Wallie Burnett glanced alertly all around to make sure no one was in sight but the collapsed old figure on the curb; then they walked briskly away, not running.

"Let's see what the old witch had," said Sam as they reached the safety of the deep doorway of a closed dry-cleaning shop.

He snapped open the worn handbag, gazed disparagingly at the neatly folded handkerchief, the door key, and the little tin box of aspirin tablets. He drew out the shabby purse and held it jeeringly before Wallie's eyes.

"For Pete's sake! Twenty cents!" Wallie exclaimed. "Hell! I told you she was some old dame from the South Side, not one of the loaded broads from around here."

He laughed. Sam needed to be reminded who the leader was.

"She didn't even have a wrist watch on her; I looked," Sam agreed gloomily. "Well, let's see what's in that paper bag you're carrying."

"Her lunch, probably." Wallie untwisted the bag and peered inside. He let out a whistle. Sam looked too.

"Well, what do you know?" he

crowed. "Where'd she get the fancy jewelry? She must've stolen it." They both chuckled.

"Come on," Wallie ordered. "We'll go over to your place. Your old lady'll be out."

"Half of it's mine," said Sam defensively.

"Okay, okay. What we've got to do is sell it and split the money."

"Do you think it's real?"

"How would I know? It don't look like this cheap junk, that's all I know. Let's get a look at it in a good light. If it's worth anything, I know where we can get the best price for it."

"Where?"

"That's telling," Willie said derisively. "Who's running this business, anyway?"

"All right, Wallie." Sam's tone was placating, as befitted the younger and smaller member of the firm. "But mightn't we get more if somebody offered a reward for it?"

"Who? That old bat with twenty cents on her? Be your age."

Sam was silent, as became a neophyte. Wallie would stop taking him along on these muggings and heists if he didn't keep his mouth buttoned more.

They went up in the housing project elevator to Sam's apartment, Wallie holding the paper bag under his jacket in case they met anybody. Sam's mother worked at night, cleaning in an office building downtown.

Sam locked the door behind them, switched on the light, and pulled down the shades. When he turned around, Wallie had taken the necklace from the bag and was holding it by either end under the ceiling light, gazing at it appraisingly.

"I'll bet you a thousand dollars this stuff is real," he said. "Look how the stones shine."

"Lemme see." Sam reached out for it.

"Wait a minute." Wallie jerked it back. "You'll get your turn."

Sam, emboldened, grabbed it and pulled. The delicate silver wire with which Joyce Ledderby had fashioned the necklace gave way, and the crystals fell in a rainbow heap on the linoleum-covered floor.

"Now look what you done!" Wallie aimed a swipe at Sam that stung. Both boys got down on their knees and began to pick up the shining crystals and put them back in the crumpled paper bag. Sam's left eye hurt where Wallie had hit him; he freed one hand to rub the place hard. Wallie blew a wet razzberry at him that scattered spittle; he wiped his mouth with grimy fingers that were still holding one of the pretty stones.

"Boy!" he said. "This stuff is *real*. It'll set us up for life!"

Sam nodded his agreement.

"It'll do that all right," he echoed. "It's the living end!"

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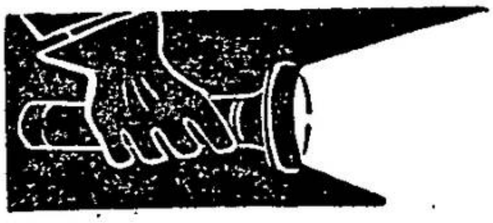

BEST MYSTERIES OF 1964

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

A reviewer's life does have its rewarding moments. You go along steadily admiring a number of good professional books while wistfully recalling certain great classics of the past—and then all of a sudden, within a scant six months, you find three of the most distinguished suspense novels you've ever read. Nominated not merely for best-of-1964, but for the next edition of the Haycraft-Queen Definitive Library, are the illuminating novel of today's espionage:

THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD, by John le Carre (Coward, $4.50)

the brilliant fusion of mainstream novel and surprise-suspense:

THE FIEND, *by Margaret Millar* (Random, $3.95)

and the extraordinary study in crime, detection, social satire, national character and history:

THE NIGHT OF THE GENERALS, *by Hans Hellmut Kirst, traslated by J. Maxwell Brownjohn* (Harper & Row, $4.95)

Even aside from such magnificent highpoints, it was a good year for the suspense novel, with strong entries in the police-procedural story:

GIDEON'S VOTE, *by J. J. Marric* (Harper & Row, $3.95)

GREENMASK! *by Elizabeth Linington* (Harper & Row, $3.95)

in the legitimate Hammett tradition of the private detective:

THE CHILL, *by Ross Macdonald* (Knopf, $3.95)

in the psychoanalytic novel of crime:

THE MISTY CURTAIN, *by Lucy Cores* (Harper & Row, $3.95)

in the romantic-Gothic feminine tradition:

THIS ROUGH MAGIC, *by Mary Stewart* (Mill-Morrow, $4.95)

and in four fine works of striking individuality, which might create traditions rather than follow them:

A KIND OF ANGER, *by Eric Ambler* (Atheneum, $4.95)

THE INCIDENT AT THE MERRY HIPPO, *by Elspeth Huxley* (Morrow, $3.95)

BURNING IS A SUBSTITUTE FOR LOVING, *by Jennie Melville* (London, $3.75)

THE ROAD TO HELL . . . , *By Hubert Monteilhet, translated by Richard Howard* (Simon & Schuster, $3.50)

For diehards like me (and Queen and many of you), it was a particularly good year for the simonpure detective story:

THE CLOCKS, *by Agatha Christie* (Dodd, Mead, $4.50)

FRAME-UP, *by Andrew Garve* (Harper & Row, $3.50)

FALLING STAR, *by Patricia Moyes* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $3.95)
A RIGHT TO DIE, *by Rex Stout* (Viking, $3.50)

And 1964 was further remarkable for the appearance of more novels by Georges Simenon, new and old, than have ever been in print at once here. THE BELLS OF BICETRE (Harcourt, Brace & World, $4.95) may well be his masterpiece, though not of crime; his best crime novels were in

FIVE TIMES MAIGRET (Harcourt, Brace & World, $4.95)
THE BLUE ROOM; THE ACCOMPLICES (Harcourt, Brace & World, $4.95)

And a Dutch author proved himself a match for Simenon in stating subtly complex truths:

QUESTION OF LOYALTY, *by Nicolas Freeling* (Harper & Row, $3.95)

First novels included, among at least a half dozen rewarding American debuts:

FRIDAY THE RABBI SLEPT LATE, *by Harry Kemelman* (Crown, $3.95)
THE TRANSCENDENTAL MURDER, *by Jane Langton* (Harper & Row, $3.95)

Short story collections included a fine volume chiefly from EQMM:

THE BLESSINGTON METHOD, *by Stanley Ellin* (Random, $3.95)

a grand group of pulp novelets of the 1940's:

KILLER IN THE RAIN, *by Raymond Chandler* (Houghton Mifflin, $5.50)

a 1927 classic never before published in this country:

MAX CARRADOS MYSTERIES, *by Ernest Bramah* (Penguin C2158, 85¢)

and a lovely batch of ancient Chinese tales new to us:

THE STRANGE CASES OF MAGISTRATE PAO, *translated and retold by Leon Comber* (Tuttle, $3.75)

Anthologies were, even more than usual, dominated by Queen:

ELLERY QUEEN'S DOUBLE DOZEN (Random, $4.95)
ELLERY QUEEN'S ANTHOLOGY: 1964 MID-YEAR EDITION (Davis, $1)
ELLERY QUEEN'S 1965 ANTHOLOGY: MWA PRESIDENTS EDITION (Davis, $1)

plus a highly welcome novelty combining crime with science fiction:

SPACE, TIME AND CRIME, *Edited by Miriam Allen deFord* (Paperback Library 52-502, 50¢)

Fact-crime in its history has offered few more attractive books than

A PICTORIAL HISTORY OF AMERICAN CRIME 1849-1929, *by Allen Churchill* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $6.95)

Also strongly commended for the permanent shelves of those who relish crime without fiction:

ROGER CASEMENT, *by H. Montgomery Hyde* (Penguin C2124, 95¢)
HATRED, RIDICULE, OR CONTEMPT, *by Joseph Dean* (Penguin 1863, $1.25)
COMMENTS ON CAIN, *by F. Tennyson Jesse* (Collier AS 520, 95¢)
THE INNOCENTS, *by Edward D. Radin* (Morrow, $4.50)

Parody concludes this survey, with a delightful Holmesian pastiche and an often uproarious unfinished (and hitherto unpublished) work:

BASIL AND THE LOST COLONY, *by Eve Titus* (Whittlesey, $2.95)
SIMON WHEELER, DETECTIVE, *by Mark Twain* (N. Y. Public Library, $5)

First publication in the United States of a curious little story about a hairdresser, an engineer, and a murder trial . . .

THE HANGMAN'S FISH

by JOHN BINGHAM

THE STORY OF HOW THE HOLIDAY plans of Mr. Harris, the London hairdresser, and his family, and of Mr. Dawson, the Yorkshire engineer, and his family, were vitally affected by the trial for murder of Mr. Barker, the Somerset butcher's assistant, merely shows the truth of the old adage that one-half of the world doesn't know how the other half lives—which, as news stories often demonstrate these days, is probably just as well.

A 17th Century writer, commenting on the conditions of his time, said that once the death sentence had been pronounced on a prisoner the wretched fellow was "no more than as a fish tossed to the hangman."

In the present instant the fish was called James Barker, and he was 25 years old, and a pretty poor fish at that.

This poor fish's trial for the murder of William Andrews was short and undramatic, because the facts were never seriously disputed; indeed, the jury chose to sit late in order to finish the case within the day, and, even so, they were able to get home in time for supper.

The facts are as follows: William Andrews was an elderly gentleman who lived alone—without even the companionship of a dog or cat—in a bungalow on the outskirts of his village.

He did not mix with anybody, never went to the local public house, and exchanaged the minimum number of words when ordering the minimum amount of weekly food in the village shops.

So he was obviously a miser, even though nobody had actually seen any boxes of gold or banknotes.

That much was clear to a good many villagers, including James Barker, who decided to try his luck about two o'clock one fine spring morning.

As a lad, Barker had had a conviction for petty pilfering, but the Andrews affair was his first major crime, and a proper mess he made of it—and also of William Andrews, if the truth be told.

And the truth was indeed told, and nothing but the truth, prob-

Copyright 1963 by John Bingham.

ably, except by the prisoner, at Barker's trial.

Harris, the hairdresser, was certainly telling the truth when he identified James Barker as the man who had tried to sell him a gold watch in a public house 50 miles away from the village.

Barker admitted being in illegal possession of the watch, but said he had found it on a local bus, and anyway didn't know it had belonged to William Andrews.

He really wasn't very bright, and besides, it didn't matter so far as the outcome of the trial was concerned, though it was, in fact, the first vital clue which enabled the police to get onto Barker's trail.

Defending counsel, laboring against hopeless odds, eventually included in his plea a strong suggestion that Barker was mentally retarded.

Perhaps he was, but it did not prevent him from becoming the hangman's fish from the moment the judge put on his black cap.

Inevitably, because it has become the normal procedure, the case of Regina vs. Barker dragged its weary way up to the Court of Criminal Appeal.

Harris the hairdresser, sitting discreetly in a corner of the public gallery, heard the defending counsel, among other things, make some rather feeble play with a probation officer's report, written ten years previously, which mentioned Barker's low and probably unstable mentality.

But there was nothing which could bring the case remotely within the M'Naughten Rules about insanity and crime. Defending counsel didn't even much care when the case was dismissed. It had been good practice for him, and the State was paying his fees.

Harris was glad that nobody queried his evidence, though his conscience was clear, always had been, and always would be.

For the next couple of weeks the hangman's fish sat in the condemned cell, playing bad games of checkers, newly learned, with a succession of bored guards.

The fish ate well, put on weight, and seemed likely to eat a hearty last breakfast, which, since people hate scenes, was a great relief to all concerned.

Harris the hairdresser felt no pity, but at the beginning of the third week he felt his interest mounting in the question of whether or not the Home Secretary would grant a reprieve.

By the middle of the week, he was even in a state of some tension, and so was his family.

Though an economical man, he found himself buying midday editions of newspapers to see if Barker was going to die or not.

When the reprieve was announced, he immediately canceled the reservations he had made to take his family to the South of

France, even though he had prudently and hopefully booked the reservations a full three months earlier.

And that was how Mr. Dawson, the Yorkshire engineer, who had booked almost at the last moment, and had been put on the waiting list, was able to obtain reservations after all.

So there were long faces in the Harris household, and gay ones in the Dawson household.

All thanks to the Home Secretary.

For although Harris, the hairdresser, who was also Harris the hangman, had fortuitously hooked his own fish, the fish had broken the line and canceled out the hangman's fee.

And that's the way the world goes round: one man's meat is another man's poison. Alternatively, stretching a point, you could say that the Dawsons got the best end of the neck.

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One of Lawrence Treat's best police procedural short stories—so far . . . a honey of a homicide case! About a simple jewelry store stick-up that turned into a tricky and complicated mystery—full of fascinating details of on-the-scene police investigation and modern scientific methods—and full of fascinating and realistic ironies . . .

B AS IN BULLETS

by LAWRENCE TREAT

THE CLUSTER OF STORES ON BRYANT Avenue, in the 9th Precinct, runs a full block. The neighborhood is quiet, respectable, middle-class. The small jewelry shop on the corner is separated from the dry cleaner's by an alley.

Nobody noticed exactly when the gray station wagon entered the alleyway that morning; nor was there a warning of anything unusual before the fusillade of shots rang out. The shots lasted about a half minute. Then the station wagon tore out to the street, turned with a squeal of tires, and roared east, heading for the suburbs. After that, when it seemed safe, the shopkeepers spilled out to the sidewalks, windows popped open, and people stuck their heads out and asked what had happened. And then the phone calls began to pour into headquarters.

The results were swift, and many. At 10:01 a.m. on police band Number 2, a city-wide alarm was broadcast for a gray station wagon with two men, armed and known to be dangerous. On another frequency, Signal Two-Nine went out—homicide, the 4000 block on Bryant. The flash brought a radio car to the scene of the crime within three minutes, and a pair of uniformed officers jumped out to guard the premises.

Two-Nine alerted a number of other personnel. Lieutenant Decker and his Homicide Squad rolled. Police Commissioner Sturm broke off a conference with a social service supervisor and ordered his limousine. Lieutenant Seward, commander of the 9th Precinct, brought a couple of detectives along with him. With the D.A. tied up in court, one of his assistants drove out to cover the call. Art Handler, of the photographic unit, packed up his gear, the Medical Examiner tried to remember where he'd left that brown bag of his, and an ambulance raced out from the North Hospital garage. And finally, radio, TV, and newspaper reporters converged on Bryant Avenue like vultures sighting a meal.

The case might or might not be big—but it sounded sensational.

Jub Freeman, Director of the Police Laboratory, had just left the new Engineering Building of the State University, where he'd been discussing some work that the city lab wasn't equipped to handle. His receiver buzzed, and he switched it on and got Signal Two-Nine and the address. His reaction was to put his foot on the gas and his finger on the siren button.

If he'd had a horse, he'd have galloped off, waving his hat and yelling at the top of his lungs, for Jub Freeman was a romantic at heart. Whether or not he looked it was another matter. He had barely enough hair to insist that he wasn't bald. Add a cheerful grin and the play of dimples that accompanied it, lively brownish eyes and round polished cheeks, and it was hard to type him. But certainly nobody ever took him for either a cop or a scientist. And he was both, clear down to his squarish toenails.

He reached the jewelry store shortly after the detail from the 9th Precinct, but ahead of the other experts. He saw a mob of people milling around the shop, and he spotted a small hole in the plate-glass window, just above the lettering: *A. Rennick, Jeweler.*

Jub parked across the street and opened the car trunk where he always stowed the black bag containing his portable equipment. He hefted the bag with affection. He'd chosen every item in it with care, and he prided himself on its compactness and completeness. Carrying the bag, he crossed the avenue briskly. The crowd on the sidewalk took him for a doctor and stepped aside, and the uniformed cop called him Mr. Lab and let him in. He stopped just inside the doorway and put his bag down.

"Holy smoke!" he exclaimed. He practically gleamed with eagerness.

Lieutenant Seward of the 9th was chewing a toothpick and studying some silver loving cups on a shelf, as if he were trying to decide which one to award himself. At the sound of the door he swung around.

"Looks like they fought a war," he said drily. "We got a casualty, too."

Jub took a deep breath, noted the broken glass of the showcase, the scattering of cartridge cases and the body on the floor. A revolver was lying a few inches from the outstretched hand, and the smell of cordite was sharp. Jub's nostrils twitched and his head jerked up.

"Done anything?" he asked.

"Just waiting," Seward said.

"Sent a couple of the boys upstairs to keep them out of your hair."

"Thanks," Jub said.

He had a free choice of where to start the scientific part of the police investigation. For a few minutes no one was likely to interrupt him, and at least ten kinds of evidence shrieked for attention. Ballistics, fingerprints, blood typing, photography, moulage work, chemistry and physics and spectography—Jub was an expert in all fields. He had to be in a city this size, where he ran the police laboratory practically single-handed.

He stooped to open his bag and take out a piece of chalk. "Those ejected shells," he commented. "Must have come from an automatic." He got down on his knees, made a circle around the first of the shells, and numbered it. Then he picked up the shell. "A thirty-eight," he said, examining it. He placed it in a small envelope and numbered the envelope. "Ought to tell us something. And that showcase and the doorknob—I'll check them for prints before they get handled. The rest of the stuff can wait."

"Doorknob?" Seward said. "They left from the rear, and probably came in that way, too."

"Right," Jub said. Seward had him there, and besides, Jub never yet had found fingerprints on a doorknob. Fingers usually slide off it, smudging the impression and making the pattern indistinguishable. Still, you have to be thorough; you have to try, and always hope for a "first time."

There was a heavy clatter on the stairs from somewhere in the back. A door slammed upstairs, gruff voices muttered, and a pair of husky detectives marched into the shop from the rear.

"Nobody up there," one of them said. "There's an apartment—I guess he lived up there, but nobody's home now."

Jub, on his hands and knees, didn't look up. He had a hunch that ballistic evidence was going to be important in this case, and he wanted to place every one of those empty shells with accuracy before they got kicked around. Where the shells lay, a killer might have stood.

Twenty minutes later the shop was jammed with official personnel, and Lieutenant Decker had the investigation organized and in full swing. Jub, working painstakingly, listened to the main facts that Decker got from witnesses and neighbors.

Arthur Rennick, jeweler and watch repairer, had lived upstairs with his wife. They'd been running the shop for about five years, and she usually helped him out in the afternoons. He carried a substantial line of diamonds and high-priced jewelry, apparently missing now, but watch repairing and inexpensive gifts were the bread-and-butter of his business.

Nobody had noticed the license-plate number of the station wagon.

All anybody could say was that there had been two men in it, that they were dressed in dark clothes, and that both wore hats. The chances were the vehicle would be found somewhere on the other side of town and would turn out to be stolen. Mrs. Arthur Rennick, when located, might be able to give a description of the missing jewelry. The list would be circulated. If any of the stuff showed up, it might lead to the killers who had pulled this job. Otherwise, Ballistics and the Modus Operandi File were about all there was to work on.

Decker, tall, grim, owl-eyed, ran his fingers through his sparse gray hair and bristled with anger. He issued instructions, listened, swore, listened some more, swore some more, and waited impatiently for the Medical Examiner. Jub could almost follow Lieutenant Decker's thinking.

Evidently Decker didn't like the looks of the case. The stick-up men hadn't planned it right, they'd taken too many chances, they'd fired too many shots, they'd been lucky to get away with it, and Decker hated lucky crooks. From the bottom of his soul, he hated them; because if they were lucky, he might not be.

Jub, industriously ferreting out evidence and carefully labeling it, finally got around to the revolver. He picked it up gingerly and broke it open. Puzzled, he stared at the cylinder and then walked over to Lieutenant Decker.

"Take a look at this," Jub said.

Decker snorted. "Only two bullets used," he said. "How many shells did you find?"

The point of the question was obvious: an automatic ejects a shell after each firing, whereas the chamber of a revolver retains the empty shells in the cylinder.

"I picked up eleven shells," Jub said, "which makes more than one clip. Say two automatics were used, one by each of the two stick-up men, and this revolver. That means they fired at him eleven times and he fired at them twice. Doesn't make sense."

"How do you know *he* fired?" Decker asked sharply.

"I don't," Jub answered, "but I'd like somebody to help me locate all the bullets and mark exactly where they hit."

"Mitch Taylor can do that," Decker said.

He gave the order. Weighed down with responsibilities, anxious to get the preliminary work over with, Decker glared morosely; but he brightened when the Medical Examiner finally arrived. Decker hovered over him and asked a single, clipped question.

"How many?"

"One," the doctor said. "He was shot once, and it looks like it went through his heart."

"Brother!" Decker exclaimed. "All those shots, and he only got hit once. And that one was a bull's-eye."

The doctor blinked. "That's all I can see now, but I may find some more after I get him on the table."

"I'll bet you three tea bags you don't." Decker said.

"Tea?" the M.E. said, frowning.

"Ten bucks, if you'd rather," Decker said. "Cash."

The M.E. laughed. "Not with you, I've lost too many times. How about giving me some odds?"

Jub, overhearing the last words, said, "Doc, don't waste time on bets, you've got things to do. How soon can I have the clothes and the death bullet delivered at the lab?"

"Any special hurry?" the doctor asked.

Jub nodded. "Yes. Big hurry."

"Well, I'll see what I can do."

Jub went over to his bag, took out fingerprint powders and a small brush, and started the long tedious job of looking for a usable print that might identify the killers.

He was working quietly and humming to himself when there was a stir outside the jewelry shop. The door opened and Commissioner Sturm strode in. He was a political appointee and he usually threw his weight around, leaving plenty of bruised feelings; but this morning he was all smiles.

"I got delayed on the way over," he said cheerfully. "Heard the news?"

"What news?" Decker asked.

"We got 'em!" Sturm announced. "The pair that pulled this. A patrol car spotted the station wagon and chased it. Two men jumped out and ran, and we caught 'em in a hallway. The loot's still in the station wagon, too—I saw it, three trays full of jewelry. We got those birds red-handed." He laughed triumphantly and slapped Decker on the back. "Makes it easy for you. All you got to do is get their statements."

"Where were they spotted?" Decker asked.

"On Emerson, near the park."

"That's only a couple of miles away," Decker said, "and it took them almost an hour to get there. Doesn't sound right to me."

"They must have stopped off somewhere."

Decker's wide gray eyes fixed themselves on the Commissioner's dark ones. "Would *you?*" Decker asked.

Sturm snorted. "Don't ask me," he said. "Ask them."

"I'll do just that," Decker said, and he whirled and strode out of the shop.

Jub, however, didn't share Decker's doubts. The Commissioner always scratched the Lieutenant the wrong way, and Decker delighted in tripping up his superior. And as for the Lieutenant's point, there were dozens of possible explanations. A flat tire, or some hitch along the escape route. There was something of the unexpected and illogical in nearly every case, no matter how simple it looked or how well it had been planned.

And this one did look routine, with Jub's work clearly cut and dried. Collect all the fingerprint and ballistic evidence on the scene. Then examine the car and tie it in with the robbery. Get the essential evidence needed for the eventual court case. And meanwhile, Decker would interrogate the suspects and probably wind up with a pair of confessions.

Mitch Taylor crossed the room and tapped Jub on the shoulder. Mitch's high-pitched voice was barely above a whisper. "Jub, I've been working on the slugs and I dug two of them out of the ceiling. What kind of a joker shoots at the ceiling? We dealing with kids, or what?"

"I thought you always liked things nice and simple," Jub said.

Mitch shrugged. "How's it going with the prints?"

"Nothing to get excited about, and I'm almost through. Besides, it's time to examine that station wagon. Want to come along?"

"Sure," Mitch said. "Why not?" It sounded like easy work, and that was for Mitch.

The gray station wagon had been towed to the police garage, and Art Handler was still photographing it when Jub and Mitch arrived. While they waited for Art to finish up, they looked at the car from the outside.

The three trays of jewelry were still on the back seat, in plain sight, and they contrasted strangely with some toys alongside—a doll with one arm missing, a rubber hatchet, a pair of miniature plastic automobiles. The front seat was badly stained, and a half dozen pieces of yellow cleansing tissue lay crumpled on the floor.

Mitch, studying the car with a practised eye, said, "Look at that window—you can see where somebody forced it to get in. You'll probably find out they used a jumper wire to start the motor. Jub, I better check on whose car it is. The Lieutenant ought to have the dope on it, by now."

"Good idea," Jub said.

While Mitch was gone, Jub waited impatiently and noted in his mind the items to work on. Bits of glass scattered on the velvet lining of the jewelry trays—he'd have to match them with the broken glass he'd collected from the showcase. Those stains on the front seat—he'd scrape off what he could, and analyze. Fingerprints weren't likely, except perhaps on the jewel trays. He'd vacuum the car section by section, and gather each set of sweepings in a separate bag. The yellow cleansing tissues he'd put in an envelope and not bother with for a while—they probably had no connection with the hold-up and murder.

Mitch returned with the ownership information. "Belongs to a Mrs. George Saylor," he said. "She has three kids. She parked around the corner from her house last night, and didn't even know her car was missing. I called her up, and she said she gave her kids some ice cream cones and they spilt the stuff all over the seats."

"The stains," Jub said. "So we know what they are."

"I asked about the tissues, and she says she never uses yellow ones. So where do they come from, huh? You think crooks are going sanitary on us?"

Jub laughed. Art finished and put his camera away. "All yours," he said.

Jub's examination, with Mitch helping, was thorough, professional, but it revealed nothing startling. Jub was glad when it was over and he was free to go up to his lab on the second floor. For, while it was exciting to be at the scene of a crime and more or less satisfying to collect evidence, the stuff of life to Jub was to peer into a microscope, make charts, and watch the statistical probabilities pile up.

Once he was in his lab he organized his program and decided to start from the ballistics angle. He set up a test range and fired bullets into it from the revolver that had been found next to the body. He fired into a bank of old telephone books backed up by a steel plate.

He compared the slugs with the ones that had been gathered at the scene, and nothing matched. He examined the shell cases. Five of them bore identical scratch marks, but the other six had an entirely different set of marks, obviously made by a different ejector. It followed that two guns had been used, both of them automatics.

He examined the bullets, weighed them, counted the number of grooves, and observed the direction of twist, which was to the left; he measured the rate of twist and the groove diameters. He used a microscope and he referred to ballistic tables and came up with the type of guns that had probably been used. Colt .38 automatics.

At three o'clock the M.E. sent over the death bullet, along with the clothes Rennick had been wearing. The slug was in good condition, barely fragmented and flattened out on one side only. Hopefully, Jub put it in the comparison microscope and compared it with the best of the bullets that had been found this morning.

No match.

Puzzled, Jub compared it with the test bullets he'd fired from the revolver.

The match was perfect.

Jub sat down and thought that one over. The phone rang, and Lieutenant Decker spoke.

"Jub, we're having some trouble with those two suspects. They claim they didn't fire any shots, and it's a fact they had no guns on them. So far, I can't break 'em. They say they don't know about the car, never heard about a robbery, and that we got the wrong guys."

"We always get the wrong guys," Jub said. "But anybody who sat in that car ought to have ice cream stains on his pants, because the stuff was still gooey when I touched it. And anybody who handled the jewel trays ought to have glass slivers on his clothes. I can't guarantee it, but send me their clothes and I'll see what I can find."

"Good. I'll send Mitch Taylor up."

Jub wiped his eyes and thought of Decker's remark to the Commissioner—that it had taken the suspects almost an hour to travel a couple of miles from the scene of the crime. Jub had laughed it off then, but Decker may have had a point.

Jub, frowning, wondering how a simple, obvious case could get so tricky, picked up Rennick's shirt. The single bullet hole was a couple of inches from the third button. There was blood on the shirt, but fortunately it hadn't quite oozed over to the hole.

Jub stared, pulled the cloth taut, clamped it, and placed it on the plate of a microscope. He adjusted the viewer and frowned again, hardly believing what he saw. He examined it again under infra-red light and confirmed his observations. Scorch marks, powder tattooing.

That meant Rennick had been shot at point-blank range. If it hadn't been for the robbery and those other shots, Jub would have bet that Rennick had committed suicide.

Mitch arrived with two shirts and two pairs of pants. "How's it going?" he asked.

"Nothing to yell about. How's it going downstairs?"

"Not so good," Mitch said. "Lieutenant's chewing water with both teeth, and they're sharp. I'm trying to stay out of his way."

"Then I'd better hold off my bad news," Jub said.

"Which is what?"

"That the victim was shot with his own revolver, from close up. Know anything about that gun?"

"A little," Mitch said. "Mrs. Rennick—seems she was out marketing when it happened, and she took it bad. She's in shock. The doctor only let the Lieutenant see her a couple of minutes, but she says Rennick owned a revolver and kept it under the counter. Chances are it's the one you've got. I'm trying to trace it now."

"But how come he was shot with his own gun?" Jub asked. "What do you make out of that?"

"It looks," Mitch said, "like I'd better call Amy and tell her I won't be home for dinner." And, rolling his shoulders, resigned to his fate, he went out.

Alone, Jub picked up the clothes that Mitch had just brought in. Ahead was a microscopic examination, then vacuum cleaning and analyzing whatever substances were picked up. Jub decided on x-ray diffraction photographs and spectography, and then a comparison with the samples he'd collected from the car. That way, there would be no doubt about his conclusions.

At eight o'clock he had his results, and he went down to the Homicide Squad and entered Lieutenant Decker's office. Decker looked tired and depressed. The tiny room was piled up with papers and magazines and cartons that the Lieutenant alone knew the contents of—he and the small, stuffed crocodile leering from a shelf.

"Brother!" Decker said. "I been interviewing two of the best-educated reformatory graduates I ever came across. Those two punks won't talk. They don't know from nothing. I'm licked unless you can bail me out."

"All I can tell you is that both of them were in that station wagon and one of them sat down on some decayed vanilla ice cream. And that probably neither one handled the three jewel trays."

"Then how did the trays get in the car?" Decker said. He turned slowly in his swivel chair, letting it squeak. "Hear that?" he said. "That's my mind working."

"What does it come up with?"

"Maybe," Decker said, "those punks really didn't kill Rennick. They were unarmed and they've been screaming how innocent they are, and their records don't show they ever went in for jewelry stick-ups."

"Well?" Jub said.

"Suppose," Decker said, "there are *two* sets of crooks. Pair Number One holds up Rennick and kills him, and pair Number Two hijacks the car and that's the pair we catch."

"I thought of that," Jub said, "only I can't figure out how the hijacking was done. The first pair were armed, they'd just committed a homicide, and they had valuable loot. There would have been quite a rumpus if there had been a hijacking. So how come no sign of one, and no report of a fight from any source?"

"That," Decker said, "is something I'd like to find out, and I begin to see a great light dawning. Let's assume that Rennick fired two shots. What if he wounded one of the hold-up pair? Pair Number One, that is. Let's call them Mike and Ike. If Mike was badly wounded and Ike had to abandon the car to get help, taking Mike with him, then pair Number Two could step into the car without any fight and drive off. They wouldn't even know it was hot until a patrol car chases them. So they jump out of the car and try to escape. They get caught, and find they're facing a homicide charge. No wonder they're so tough to break—they're scared dumb!"

"The trouble is," Jub said, "that Rennick's revolver fired only two shots, and one of them killed him. The second shot could have gone through the store window. There was a hole in it."

Decker shook his head. "No," he said. "Nothing's ever that simple. Suppose Ike and Mike wrestled Rennick's gun away from him and then shot him in cold blood. Or suppose the bullet that wounded Mike caromed off and went into the ceiling. Or maybe out of the window. One of those fluke shots. Bullets are tricky. You can't chart them a hundred per cent. There are millions of million-to-one chances, and one of them happens all the time."

"Possibly," Jub said. "I'll go down there in the morning and double-check. I want to plot the path of every bullet that was fired. Maybe I can reconstruct the whole shooting."

"Go to it," Decker said. "I'll keep on working on the pair we've got here. Once they're not worried about a homicide charge, they'll sing. And be glad to."

Jub yawned, grinned, and yawned again. "Had dinner?" he asked.

Decker looked blank. "Dinner? I haven't even had lunch."

In the morning Decker gave his squad the usual briefing. He'd spent most of the night hammering out a pair of confessions, and he'd slept about three hours, but at 9:00 a.m. he was fresh as an ear of new corn.

"This one's been a lulu," he said, with a crackle in his voice, "but we've got part of it straightened out. Our two young punks admit they were walking along Melville around half-past ten yesterday morning when they noticed this empty gray station wagon. They claim they didn't see the jewelry trays, but that's malarkey. They saw the stuff all right—it was like somebody handing a kid a piece of cake when it wasn't even his birthday. Nobody was around, so they forced a window, got in, and drove off. You know the rest of it."

"Where on Melville was this?" Bankhart asked.

Decker unrolled a sectional city map, spread it out on a table, and pointed. "Here, where I've marked it. Near Lewis. We don't know why the original stick-up pair left the car. Maybe one of them was wounded. But they must have had a damn good reason, and they must have parked close to wherever they were going. This—" his finger touched the red circle he'd made—"pretty much shows the limits of where they would have gone. There are two apartment houses and seventeen other dwellings in that circle.

"It's in the third precinct, and the Third is going to block off the area while we go in and make a door to door search. Find out if anybody saw those two men. Make sure they're not hiding in the area. Any trouble about getting into a place, check with me. If these men were seen, we'll find out. If they're there, we'll grab 'em. And remember that they're armed, so don't take chances. Any questions?"

There were a few minor ones, and then Decker gave the squad their assignments and they filed out. Jub, alone, felt left out of it. The way Decker normally organized things, Jub usually went to the scene and helped interrogate suspects and followed the general progress of the case; but he was never in on the kill. He was usually holed up in his lab, checking evidence and working on the loose ends that never ended until a case was finally in court and the jury had brought in a verdict.

Like this morning. The real drama would be played out in one of the houses on Melville Avenue, while he was at the jewelry store with a tape measure and a compass and a pair of calipers and some rods and a camera, figuring out angles and tracing the path of each shot.

He drove leisurely, alternately dreaming that he would make an arrest all by himself, and wondering where that second revolver bullet had gone. Through the window and out to nowhere? Or into somebody's body? Or lodged in a crack, somewhere in the shop?

The cop guarding the place let Jub in and asked if he could help. Jub said sure, thanks, he could use him. A traffic department truck was due with a dozen stanchions, including extension poles. Jub needed the poles inside, and he could certainly use an extra hand.

The numbered chalk marks showing the positions of the ejected shells were still on the floor, and all the points where the bullets had been found were circled and numbered. Carefully, Jub measured the angle at which each bullet had struck. Then he thumbtacked ribbons at the points of impact, and using a long rod, he extended the angle until the line was just above the chalk marks on the floor; this represented approximately where the gun had been fired from. There he attached his ribbons to stanchion poles, at the proper height.

There had been two guns. He used a red ribbon to show the path of the slugs from gun A, and a green one for the slugs from gun B. The process was not exact, but it was accurate enough to show where each gun had been held when fired.

With a growing excitement Jub watched the pattern take shape, and when all eleven shots had been plotted, he was certain.

"Boy!" he exclaimed. "My hunch was right!"

The cop scratched his head. "All through?" he asked.

"Don't you see it?" Jub roared. "Mike and Ike faced each other and fired from opposite directions. They shot directly *at* each other, except that they deliberately aimed either high or wide. And one of them fired from a level of over six feet—must have held the gun over his head. Don't you see it?"

The cop grunted, and Jub let out a yelp. This was a case he was solving all by himself. He'd finally put one over on the Homicide Squad, and he'd be able to kid them about it for years. While the squad was making their house-to-house search, Jub could pull off an arrest by himself.

He whirled, strode to the rear of the shop, and clattered up the stairs. He entered the apartment without knocking and saw an attractive woman with black hair and dark eyes. The eyes were red-rimmed now, and the woman's face was haggard.

"Mrs. Rennick?" he said. She nodded, and almost against his better judgment Jub blurted out, "Why did you kill your husband?"

For a moment she was too stunned to answer. Jub said again, "You killed your husband. Why?"

"I didn't," she said. Her voice was strained, dull. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Freeman, police. We know there was no real gun battle, that it was faked. You killed your husband and then left in the station wagon with your boy friend. You wore slacks and a man's hat, and you were upset and crying and used up a half dozen pieces of yellow cleansing tissue. Was the robbery just a blind for the murder? Was that your plan?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You—" And she burst into hysterical sobs, raised her arm as if to strike him, and then pitched forward. She seemed to go into some kind of fit, and Jub caught her and had just managed to quiet her down when Inspectors Mitch Taylor and Bankhart burst in.

Mitch, anxious to give nothing away, narrowed his eyes and said, "What goes, Jub?"

Jub answered guardedly. "I was interrogating her and she passed out. What brought you here?"

"We're taking her in," Mitch said. "Bank, you handle her, huh?"

Bankhart, two hundred-odd pounds of efficiency, moved forward. He half carried, half prodded Mrs. Rennick out of the room and headed her down the stairs.

Mitch relaxed. "Didn't want to talk in front of her," he said. "Keep her guessing, and let the Lieutenant tackle her the way he wants."

"What happened?" Jub asked.

"We sprung a guy called Smitty hiding in one of the apartment houses, and he had both guns and tried to use them. Once we slapped him down, he admitted the whole business. He's Mrs. Rennick's brother, and he's a hood from Detroit. He said him and the Rennicks decided to fake a stick-up. Smitty would fence the stuff, that was his share, and the Rennicks would collect the insurance. They needed the cash.

"So the idea was, Smitty and the Rennick female would fire those shots and bust the showcase, and Rennick would shoot himself in the arm, just a flesh wound or something to make it look real. Nothing serious. He'd just give himself a gash.

"Well, the scheme started out all right and Rennick fired one shot through the window, and then he tripped and his gun went off and killed him. Which maybe makes it a homicide committed in the course of a felony, but that's up to the D.A."

"She was dressed up like a man?" Jub said.

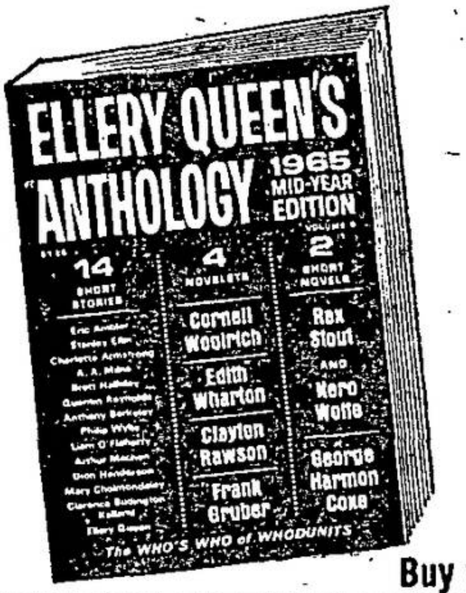
"Yeah, only she didn't act like one. Went into hysterics on account she didn't know how bad her husband was hurt. Smitty got her into the car all right, but she yelled and carried on and couldn't control herself, so Smitty brought her to his room to calm her down. He had to, so she could change her clothes and go home and pretend to hear about the hold-up for the first time. That's why Smitty parked the car and left it. And that's when the pair of punks spotted it and took off. So I guess we got everything straightened out—except one thing."

"What's that?" Jub asked.

"All those Christmas decorations you got downstairs—what are they for, huh?"

Jub grinned. "They look nice, don't they?" he said.

"Yeah," Mitch said. It was his personal commentary on the part that science plays in modern police techniques.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THE GUN WITH WINGS

by REX STOUT

THE YOUNG WOMAN TOOK A PINK piece of paper from her handbag, got up from the red leather chair, put the paper on Nero Wolfe's desk, and sat down again. Feeling it my duty to keep myself informed and also to save Wolfe the exertion of leaning forward and reaching so far, I arose and crossed to hand the paper to him after a glance at it.

It was a check for five thousand dollars, dated that day, August fourteenth, made out to him, and signed Margaret Mion. He gave a look and dropped it back on the desk.

"I thought," she said, "perhaps that would be the best way to start the conversation."

In my chair at my desk, taking her in, I was readjusting my attitude. When, early that Sunday afternoon, she had phoned for an appointment, I had dug up a vague recollection of a picture of her in the paper some months back, and had decided it would be no treat to meet her; but now I was hedging.

Her appeal wasn't what she had, which was only so-so, but what she did with it. I don't mean tricks. Her mouth wasn't attractive even when she smiled, but the smile was. Her eyes were just a pair of brown eyes, nothing at all sensational, but it was a pleasure to watch them move around, from Wolfe to me to the man who had come with her, seated off to her left. I guessed she

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had maybe three years to go to reach thirty.

"Don't you think," the man asked her, "we should get some questions answered first?"

His tone was strained and a little harsh, and his face matched it. He was worried and didn't care who knew it. With his deep-set gray eyes and well-fitted jaw he might on a happier day have passed for a leader of men, but not as he now sat. Something was eating him. When Mrs. Mion had introduced him as Mr. Frederick Weppler I had recognized the name of the music critic of the *Gazette,* but I couldn't remember whether he had been mentioned in the newspaper accounts of the event that had caused the publication of Mrs. Mion's picture.

She shook her head at him, not arbitrarily. "It wouldn't help, Fred, really. We'll just have to tell it and see what he says." She smiled at Wolfe—or maybe it wasn't actually a smile, but just her way of handling her lips. "Mr. Weppler wasn't quite sure we should come to see you, and I had to persuade him. Men are more cautious than women, aren't they?"

"Yes," Wolfe agreed, and added, "Thank heaven."

She nodded. "I suppose so." She gestured. "I brought that check with me to show that we really mean it. We're in trouble and we want you to get us out. We want to get married and we can't. That is—if I should just speak for myself—I want to marry him." She looked at Weppler, and this time it was unquestionably a smile. "Do you want to marry me, Fred?"

"Yes," he muttered. Then he suddenly jerked his chin up and looked defiantly at Wolfe. "You understand this is embarrassing, don't you? It's none of your business, but we've come to get your help. I'm thirty-four years old, and this is the first time I've ever been—" He stopped. In a moment he said stiffly, "I am in love with Mrs. Mion and I want to marry her more than I have ever wanted anything in my life." His eyes went to his love and he murmured a plea. "Peggy!"

Wolfe grunted. "I accept that as proven. You both want to get married. Why don't you?"

"Because we can't," Peggy said. "We simply can't. It's on account—you may remember reading about my husband's death in April, four months ago? Alberto Mion, the opera singer?"

"Vaguely. You'd better refresh my memory."

"Well, he killed himself." There was no sign of a smile now. "Fred—Mr. Weppler and I found him. It was seven o'clock, a Tuesday evening in April, at our apartment on East End Avenue. Just that afternoon Fred and I had found out that we loved each other, and—"

"Peggy!" Weppler called sharply.

Her eyes darted to him and back

to Wolfe. "Perhaps I should ask you, Mr. Wolfe. He thinks we should tell you just enough so you understand the problem, and I think you can't understand it unless we tell you everything. What do you think?"

"I can't say until I hear it. Go ahead. If I have questions, we'll see."

She nodded. "I imagine you'll have plenty of questions. Have you ever been in love but would have died rather than let anyone see it?"

"Never," Wolfe said emphatically. I kept my face straight.

"Well, I was, and I admit it. But no one knew it, not even him. Did you, Fred?"

"I did not." Weppler was emphatic too.

"Until that afternoon," Peggy told Wolfe. "He was at the apartment for lunch, and it happened right after lunch. The others had left, and all of a sudden we were looking at each other, and then he spoke or I did, I don't know which." She looked at Weppler imploringly. "I know you think this is embarrassing, Fred, but if he doesn't know what it was like, he won't understand why you went upstairs to see Alberto."

"Does he have to?" Weppler demanded.

"Of course he does." She returned to Wolfe. "I suppose I can't make you see what it was like. We were completely—well, we were in love, that's all, and I guess we had been for quite a while without saying it, and that made it all the more—more overwhelming. Fred wanted to see my husband right away, to tell him about it and decide what we could do, and I said all right, so he went upstairs—"

"Upstairs?"

"Yes, it's a duplex, and upstairs was my husband's soundproofed studio, where he practiced. So he went—"

"Please, Peggy," Weppler interrupted her. His eyes went to Wolfe. "You should have it first-hand. I went up to tell Mion that I loved his wife, and she loved me and not him, and to ask him to be civilized about it. Getting a divorce has come to be regarded as fairly civilized, but he didn't see it that way. He was anything but civilized. He wasn't violent, but he was damned mean. After some of that I got afraid I might do to him what Giff James had done, and I left. I didn't want to go back to Mrs. Mion while I was in that state of mind, so I left the studio by the door to the upper hall and took the elevator there."

He stopped.

"And?" Wolfe prodded him.

"I walked it off. I walked across to the park, and after a while I calmed down and phoned Mrs. Mion, and she met me in the park. I told her what Mion's attitude was, and I asked her to leave him and come with me. She wouldn't do that." Weppler paused, and then went on, "There are two complications you ought to have if you're to have everything."

"If they're relevant, yes."

"They're relevant all right. First, Mrs. Mion had and has money of her own. That was an added attraction for Mion. It wasn't for me. I'm just telling you."

"Thank you. And the second?"

"The second was Mrs. Mion's reason for not leaving Mion immediately. I suppose you know he had been the top tenor at the Met for five or six years, and his voice was gone—temporarily. Gifford-James, the baritone, had hit him on the neck with his fist and hurt his larynx—that was early in March—and Mion couldn't finish the season. It had been operated on, but his voice hadn't come back, and naturally he was glum, and Mrs. Mion wouldn't leave him under those circumstances. I tried to persuade her to, but she wouldn't.

"I wasn't anything like normal that day, on account of what had happened to me for the first time in my life, and on account of what Mion had said to me, so I wasn't reasonable and I left her in the park and went downtown to a bar and started drinking. A lot of time went by and I had quite a few, but I wasn't pickled. Along toward seven o'clock I decided I had to see her again and carry her off so she wouldn't spend another night there.

"That mood took me back to East End Avenue and up to the twelfth floor, and then I stood there in the hall a while, perhaps ten minutes, before my finger went to the pushbutton. Finally I rang, and the maid let me in and went for Mrs. Mion, but I had lost my nerve or something. All I did was suggest that we should have a talk with Mion together. She agreed, and we went upstairs and—"

"Using the elevator?"

"No, the stairs inside the apartment. We entered the studio. Mion was on the floor. We went over to him. There was a big hole through the top of his head. He was dead. I led Mrs. Mion out, made her come, and on the stairs—they're too narrow to go two abreast—she fell and rolled halfway down. I carried her to her room and put her on her bed, and I started for the living room, for the phone there, when I thought of something to do first.

"I went out and took the elevator to the ground floor, got the doorman and elevator man together, and asked them who had been taken up to the Mion apartment, either the twelfth floor or the thirteenth, that afternoon. I said they must be damn sure not to skip anybody. They gave me the names and I wrote them down. Then I went back up to the apartment and phoned the police.

"After I did that it struck me that a layman isn't supposed to decide if a man is dead, so I phoned Dr. Lloyd, who has an apartment there in the building. He came at once, and I took him up to the studio. We hadn't been there more then three or four minutes when the first policeman came, and of course—"

"If you please," Wolfe put in crossly. "Everything is sometimes too much. You haven't even hinted at the trouble you're in."

"I'll get to it—"

"But faster, I hope, if I help. My memory has been jogged. The doctor and the police pronounced him dead. The muzzle of the revolver had been thrust into his mouth, and the emerging bullet had torn out a piece of his skull. The revolver, found lying on the floor beside him, belonged to him and was kept there in the studio. There was no sign of any struggle and no mark of any other injury on him. The loss of his voice was an excellent motive for suicide. Therefore, after a routine investigation, giving due weight to the difficulty of sticking the barrel of a loaded revolver into a man's mouth without arousing him to protest, it was recorded as suicide. Isn't that correct?"

They nodded.

"Have the police reopened it? Or is gossip at work?"

They shook their heads.

"Then let's get on. Where's the trouble?"

"It's us," Peggy said.

"Why? What's wrong with you?"

"Everything." She gestured. "No, I don't mean that—not everything, just one thing. After my husband's death and the routine investigation, I went away for a while. When I came back—for the past two months Fred and I have been together some, but it wasn't right—I mean we didn't feel right. The day before yesterday, Friday, I went to friends in Connecticut for the week-end, and he was there. Neither of us knew the other was coming. We talked it out yesterday and last night and this morning, and we decided to come and ask you to help us—anyway, I did, and he wouldn't let me come alone."

Peggy leaned forward in deadly earnest. "You *must* help us, Mr. Wolfe. I love him so much—so much!—and he says he loves me, and I know he does! Yesterday afternoon we decided we would get married in October, and then last night we got started talking—but it isn't what we say; it's what is in our eyes when we look at each other. We just can't get married with that back of our eyes and trying to hide it—"

A little shiver went over her. "For years—forever? We can't! We know we can't—it would be horrible! What it is, it's a question: who killed Alberto? Did he? Did I? I don't really think Fred did, and he doesn't really think I did—I hope he doesn't—but it's there back of our eyes, and we know it is!"

She extended both hands. "We want you to find out!"

Wolfe snorted. "Nonsense. You need a spanking or a psychiatrist. The police may have shortcomings, but they're not nincompoops. If they're satisfied—"

"But that's it! They wouldn't be satisfied if we had told the truth!"

"Oh." Wolfe's brows went up. "You lied to them?"

"Yes. Or if we didn't lie, anyhow we didn't tell them the truth. We didn't tell them that when we first went in together and saw him, there was no gun lying there. There was no gun in sight."

"Indeed. How sure are you?"

"Absolutely positive. I never saw anything clearer than I saw that—that sight—all of it. There was no gun."

Wolfe snapped at Weppler, "You agree, sir?"

"Yes. She's right."

Wolfe sighed. "Well," he conceded, "I can see that you're really in trouble. Spanking wouldn't help."

I shifted in my chair on account of a tingle at the lower part of my spine. Nero Wolfe's old brownstone house on West Thirty-fifth Street was an interesting place to live and work—for Fritz Brenner, the chef and housekeeper, for Theodore Horstmann, who fed and nursed the ten thousand orchids in the plant rooms on the roof, and for me, Archie Goodwin, whose main field of operations was the big office on the ground floor.

Naturally I thought my job the most interesting, since a confidential assistant to a famous private detective is constantly getting an earful of all kinds of troubles and problems—everything from a missing necklace to a new blackmail gimmick. Very few clients actually bored me. But only one kind of case gave me that tingle in the spine: murder. And if this pair of lovebirds were talking straight, this was it.

I had filled two notebooks when they left, more than two hours later.

If they had thought it through before they phoned for an appointment with Wolfe, they wouldn't have phoned. All they wanted, as Wolfe pointed out, was the moon. They wanted him, first, to investigate a four-month-old murder without letting on there had been one; second, to prove that neither of them had killed Alberto Mion, which could be done only by finding out who had; and third, in case he concluded that one of them had done it, to file it away and forget it.

Not that they put it that way, since their story was that they were both absolutely innocent; but that was what it amounted to.

Wolfe made it good and plain. "If I take the job," he told them, "and find evidence to convict someone of murder, no matter who, the use I make of it will be solely in my discretion. I am neither an Astraea nor a sadist, but I like my door open. But if you want to drop it now, here's your check, and Mr. Goodwin's notebooks will be destroyed. We can forget you have been here, and shall."

That was one of the moments when they were within an ace of getting up and going, especially Fred Weppler, but they didn't. They looked at each other, and it was all in their eyes. By that time I had about decided I liked them both pretty well and was even beginning to admire them, they were so damn determined to get loose from the trap they were in. When they looked at each other like that their eyes said, "Let's go and be together, my darling love, and forget this—come on, come on." Then they said, "It will be so wonderful!" Then they said, "Yes, oh, yes, but— But we don't want it wonderful for a day or a week; it must be always wonderful—and we know . . ."

It took strong muscles to hold onto it like that, not to mention horse sense, and several times I caught myself feeling sentimental about it. Then of course there was the check for five grand on Wolfe's desk.

The notebooks were full of assorted matters. There were a thousand details which might or might not turn out to be pertinent—such as the mutual dislike between Peggy Mion and Rupert Grove, her husband's manager, or the occasion of Gifford James socking Alberto Mion in front of witnesses, or the attitudes of various persons toward Mion's demand for damages; but you couldn't use it all, and Wolfe himself never needed more than a fraction of it, so I'll pick and choose.

Of course, the gun was Exhibit A. It was a new one, having been bought by Mion the day after Gifford James had slugged him and hurt his larynx—not, he had announced, for vengeance on James but for future protection. He had carried it in a pocket whenever he went out, and at home had kept it in the studio, lying on the base of a bust of Caruso. So far as known, it had never fired but one bullet—the one that killed Mion.

When Dr. Lloyd had arrived and Weppler had taken him to the studio, the gun was lying on the floor not far from Mion's knee. Dr. Lloyd's hand had started for it but had been withdrawn without touching it, so it had been there when the law came. Peggy was positive it had not been there when she and Fred had entered, and he agreed. The cops had made no announcement about fingerprints, which wasn't surprising since none are hardly ever found on a gun that are any good. Throughout the two hours and a half, Wolfe kept darting back to the gun, but it simply didn't have wings.

The picture of the day and the day's people was all filled in. The morning seemed irrelevant, so it started at lunchtime with five of them there: Mion, Peggy, Fred, one Adele Bosley, and Dr. Lloyd. It was more professional than social. Fred had been invited because Mion wanted to sell him the idea of writing a piece for the *Gazette* saying that the rumors that Mion would never be able to sing again were malicious hooey. Adele Bosley, who was in charge of Public Relations for the Metropolitan Opera, had come to help work on Fred. Dr. Lloyd had been asked so he could assure Weppler that the operation he had performed on Mion's larynx had been successful and it was a good bet that by the time the opera season opened in November the great tenor would be as good as ever.

Nothing special had happened except that Fred had agreed to do the piece. Adele Bosley and Dr. Lloyd had left, and Mion had gone up to the soundproofed studio, and Fred and Peggy had looked at each other and suddenly discovered the most important fact of life since the Garden of Eden.

An hour or so later there had been another gathering, this time up in the studio, around half-past three, but neither Fred nor Peggy had been present. By then Fred had walked himself calm and phoned Peggy, and she had gone to meet him in the park, so their information on the meeting in the studio was hearsay. Besides Mion and Dr. Lloyd there had been four people: Adele Bosley for operatic public relations; Mr. Rupert Grove, Mion's manager; Mr. Gifford James, the baritone who had socked Mion in the neck six weeks before; and Judge Henry Arnold, James's lawyer. This affair had been even less social than the lunch, having been arranged to discuss a formal request that Mion had made of Gifford James for the payment of a quarter of a million bucks for the damage to Mion's larynx.

Fred and Peggy's hearsay had it that the conference had been fairly hot at points, with the temperature boosted right at the beginning by Mion's getting the gun from Caruso's bust and placing it on a table at his elbow. On the details of its course they were pretty sketchy, since they hadn't been there, but anyhow the gun hadn't been fired.

Also there was plenty of evidence that Mion was alive and well—except for his larynx—when the party broke up. He had made two phone calls after the conference had ended, one to his barber and one to a wealthy female opera patron; his manager, Rupert Grove, had phoned him a little later; and around five thirty he had phoned downstairs to the maid to bring him a bottle of vermouth and some ice, which she had done. She had taken the tray into the studio, and he had been upright and intact.

I was careful to get all the names spelled right in my notebook, since it seemed likely the job would be to get one of them tagged for murder, and I was especially careful with the last one that got in: Clara James, Gifford's daughter. There were three spotlights on her. First, the reason for James's assault on Mion had been his knowledge or suspicion—Fred and Peggy weren't sure which—that Mion had stepped over the line with James's daughter.

Second, her name had ended the list, got by Fred from the doorman and elevator man, of people who had called that afternoon. They said she had come about a quarter past six and had got off at the floor the studio was on, the thirteenth, and had summoned the elevator to the twelfth floor a little later, maybe ten minutes, and had left.

The third spotlight was directed by Peggy, who had stayed in the park a while after Fred had marched off, and had then returned home, arriving around five o'clock. She had not gone up to the studio and had not seen her husband. Some time after six, she thought around half-past, she had answered the doorbell herself because the maid had been in the kitchen with the cook.

It was Clara James. She was pale and tense, but she was always pale and tense. She had asked for Alberto, and Peggy had said she thought he was up in the studio, and Clara had said no, he wasn't there, and never mind. When Clara went for the elevator button, Peggy had shut the door, not wanting company anyway, and particularly not Clara James.

Half an hour later Fred showed up, and they ascended to the studio together and found that Alberto was there all right, but no longer upright or intact.

That picture left room for a whole night of questions, but Wolfe concentrated on what he regarded as the essentials. Even so, we went into the third hour and the third notebook. He completely ignored some spots that I thought needed filling in: for instance, had Alberto had a habit of stepping over the line with other men's daughters or wives, or both and if so, names please. From things Fred and Peggy said I gathered that Alberto had been broad-minded about other men's women, but apparently Wolfe wasn't interested.

Along toward the end he was back on the gun again, and when they had nothing new to offer he scowled and got caustic. When they stayed glued he finally snapped at them, "Which one of you is lying?"

They looked hurt. "That won't get you anywhere," Fred Weppler said bitterly, "Or us either."

"It would be silly," Peggy Mion protested, "to come here and give you that check and then lie to you. Wouldn't it?"

"Then you're silly," Wolfe said coldly. He pointed a finger at her. "Look here. All this might be worked out, none of it is preposterous, except one thing. Who put the gun on the floor beside the body? When you two first entered the studio it wasn't there; you both swear to that, and I accept it. You left and started downstairs; you fell, and he carried you to your room. You weren't unconscious. Were you?"

"No." Peggy was meeting his gaze. "I could have walked, but he —he wanted to carry me."

"No doubt. He did so. You stayed in your room. He went to the ground floor to compile a list of those who had made themselves possible murder suspects—showing admirable foresight, by the way—came back up and phoned the police and then the doctor, who arrived without delay since he lived in the building. Not more than fifteen minutes intervened between the moment you and Mr. Weppler left the studio and the moment he and the doctor entered.

"The door from the studio to the public hall on the thirteenth floor has a lock that is automatic with the closing of the door, and the door was closed and locked. No one could possibly have entered during that fifteen minutes. You say that you had left your bed and gone to the living room, and that no one could have used that route without being seen by you. The maid and cook were in the kitchen, unaware of what was going on. So *no one* entered the studio and placed the gun on the floor."

"Someone did," Fred said doggedly.

Peggy insisted, "We don't know who had a key."

"You said that before." Wolfe was at them now. "Even if everyone had keys, I don't believe it and neither would anyone else." His eyes came to me. "Archie. Would you?"

"I'd have to see a movie of it," I admitted.

"You see?" he demanded of them. "Mr. Goodwin isn't prejudiced against you—on the contrary. He's ready to fight fire for you; see how he gets behind on his notes for the pleasure of watching you look at each other. But he agrees with me that you're lying. Since no one else could have put the gun on the floor, one of you did. I have to know about it. The circumstances may have made it imperative for you, or you thought they did."

He looked at Fred. "Suppose you opened a drawer of Mrs. Mion's dresser to get smelling salts, and the gun was there, with an odor showing it had been recently fired —put there, you would instantly conjecture, by someone to direct suspicion at her. What would you naturally do? Exactly what you did do; take it upstairs and put it beside the body, without letting her know about it. Or—"

"Rot," Fred said harshly. "Absolute rot."

Wolfe looked at Peggy. "Or suppose it was you who found it there in your bedroom, after he had gone downstairs. Naturally you would have—"

"This is absurd," Peggy said with spirit. "How could it have been in my bedroom unless I put it there? My husband was alive at five thirty, and I got home before that, and was right there, in the living room and bedroom, until Fred came at seven o'clock. So unless you assume—"

"Very well," Wolfe conceded, "Not the bedroom. But somewhere. I can't proceed until I get this out of one of you. Confound it, the gun didn't fly. I expect plenty of lies from the others, at least one of them, but I want the truth from you."

"You've got it," Fred declared.

"No. I haven't."

"Then it's a stalemate." Fred stood up. "Well, Peggy?"

They looked at each other, and their eyes went through the performance again. When they got to the place in the script where it said, "It must be wonderful always," Fred sat down.

But Wolfe, having no part in the script, horned in. "A stalemate," he said dryly, "ends the game, I believe."

Plainly it was up to me. If Wolfe openly committed himself to no dice, nothing would budge him. I arose, got the pretty pink check from his desk, put it on mine, placed a paperweight on it, sat down, and grinned at him.

"Granted that you're dead right," I observed, "which is not what you call apodictical, some day we ought to make up a list of the clients that have sat here and lied to us. There was Mike Walsh, and Calida Frost, and that cafeteria guy, Pratt—oh, dozens. But their money was good, and I didn't get so far behind with my notes that I couldn't catch up. All that for nothing?"

"About those notes," Fred Weppler said firmly. "I want to make something clear."

Wolfe looked at him.

He looked back. "We came here," he said, "to tell you in confidence about a problem and get you to investigate. Your accusing us of lying makes me wonder if we ought to go on, but if Mrs. Mion wants to I'm willing. But I want to make it plain that if you divulge what we've told you, if you tell the police or anyone else that we said there was no gun there when we went in, we'll deny it in spite of your damn notes. We'll deny it and stick to it!" He looked at his girl. "We've got to, Peggy! All right?"

"He wouldn't tell the police," Peggy declared, with fair conviction.

"Maybe not. But if he does, you'll

stick with me on the denial. Won't you?"

"Certainly I will," she promised, as if he had asked her to help kill a rattlesnake.

Wolfe was taking them in, his lips tightened. Obviously, with the check on my desk on its way to the bank, he had decided to add them to the list of clients who told lies and go on from there. He forced his eyes wide open to rest them, let them half close again, and spoke.

"We'll settle that along with other things before we're through," he asserted. "You realize, of course, that I'm assuming your innocence—but I've made a thousand wrong assumptions before now, so they're not worth much. Has either of you a notion of who killed Mr. Mion?"

They shook their heads.

He grunted. "I have."

They opened their eyes at him.

He nodded. "It's only another assumption, but I like it. It will take work to validate it. To begin with, I must see the people you have mentioned—all six of them—and I would prefer not to string it out. Since you don't want them told that I'm investigating a murder, we must devise a stratagem. Did your husband leave a will, Mrs. Mion?"

She nodded.

"Are you the heir?"

"Yes, I—" She gestured. "I don't need it and don't want it."

"But it's yours. That will do nicely. An asset of the estate is the expectation of damages to be paid by Mr. James for his assault on Mr. Mion. You may properly claim that asset. The six people I want to see were all concerned in that affair, one way or another. I'll write them immediately, mailing the letters tonight Special Delivery, telling them that I represent you in the matter and would like them to call at my office tomorrow evening."

"That's impossible!" Peggy cried, shocked. "I couldn't! I wouldn't dream of asking Giff to pay damages—"

Wolfe banged a fist on his desk. "Confound it!" he roared. "Get out of here! Go! Do you think murders are solved by cutting out paper dolls? First you lie to me, and now you refuse to annoy people, including the murderer! Archie, put them out!"

"Good for you," I muttered at him. I was getting fed up too. I glared at the would-be-clients. "Try the Salvation Army," I suggested. "They're old hands at helping people in trouble. You can have the notebooks to take along—at cost, six bits. No charge for the contents."

They were looking at each other.

"I guess he has to see them somehow," Fred conceded. "He has to have a reason, and I must admit that's a good one. You don't owe them anything—not one of them."

Peggy gave in.

After a few details had been attended to, the most important of which was getting addresses, they left. The manner of their going, and of our speeding them, was so far from cordial that it might have been thought that instead of being the clients they were the prey. But the check was on my desk. When, after letting them out, I returned to the office, Wolfe was leaning back with his eyes shut, frowning in distaste.

I stretched and yawned. "This ought to be fun," I said encouragingly. "Making it just a grab for damages. If the murderer is among the guests, see how long you can keep it from him. I bet he catches on before the jury comes in with the verdict."

"Shut up," he growled. "Blockheads."

"Oh, have a heart," I protested. "People in love aren't supposed to think—that's why they have to hire trained thinkers. You should be happy and proud they picked you. What's a good big lie or two when you're in love? When I saw—"

"Shut up," he repeated. His eyes came open. "Your notebook. Those letters must go at once."

Monday evening's party lasted a full three hours, and murder wasn't mentioned once. Even so, it wasn't exactly jolly. The letters had put it straight that Wolfe, acting for Mrs. Mion, wanted to find out whether an appropriate sum could be collected from Gifford James without resort to lawyers and a court, and what sum would be thought appropriate.

So each of them was naturally in a state of mind: Gifford James himself; his daughter Clara; his lawyer, Judge Henry Arnold; Adele Bosley for Public Relations; Dr. Nicholas Lloyd as the technical expert; and Rupert Grove, who had been Mion's manager. That made six, which was just comfortable for our big office. Fred and Peggy had not been invited.

The James trio arrived together and were so punctual, right on the dot at nine o'clock, that Wolfe and I hadn't yet finished our after-dinner coffee in the office. I was so curious to have a look that I went to answer the door instead of leaving it to Fritz, the chef and house overseer who helps to make Wolfe's days and years a joy forever almost as much as I do.

The first thing that impressed me was that the baritone took the lead crossing the threshold, letting his daughter and his lawyer tag along behind. Since I have occasionally let Lily Rowan share her pair of opera seats with me, James's six feet and broad shoulders and cocky strut were nothing new, but I was surprised that he looked so young, since he must have been close to fifty. He handed me his hat as if taking care of his hat on Monday evening, August 15, was the one and only thing I had been born for. Unfortunately, I let it drop.

Clara made up for it by looking at me. That alone showed she was unusually observant, since one never looks at the flunkey who lets one in; but she saw me drop her father's hat and gave me a glance, and then prolonged the glance until it practically said, "What are you, in disguise? See you later."

That made me feel friendly, but with reserve. Not only was she pale and tense, as Peggy Mion had said, but her blue eyes glistened, and a girl her age shouldn't glisten like that. Neverthless, I gave her a grin to show that I appreciated the prolonged glance.

Meanwhile, the lawyer, Judge Henry Arnold, had hung up his own hat. During the day I had of course made inquiries on all of them, and had learned that he rated the "Judge" only because he had once been a City Magistrate. Even so, that's what they called him, so the sight of him was a letdown. He was a little sawed-off squirt with a bald head so flat on top you could have kept an ashtray on it, and his nose was pushed in. He must have been better arranged inside than out, since he had quite a list of clients among the higher levels on Broadway.

Taking them to the office and introducing them to Wolfe, I undertook to assign them to some of the yellow chairs, but the baritone spied the red leather one and copped it. I was helping Fritz fill their orders for drinks when the buzzer sounded and I went back to the front.

It was Dr. Nicholas Lloyd. He had no hat, so that point wasn't raised, and I decided that the searching look he aimed at me was merely professional and automatic, to see if I was anemic or diabetic or what. With his lined handsome face and worried dark eyes he looked every inch a doctor and even surgeon, fully up to the classy reputation my inquiries had disclosed. When I ushered him to the office his eyes lighted up at sight of the refreshment table, and he was the best customer—bourbon and water with mint—all evening.

The last two came together—at least, they were on the stoop together when I opened the door. I would probably have given Adele Bosley the red leather chair if James hadn't already copped it. She shook hands and said she had been wanting to meet Archie Goodwin for years, but that was just public relations and went out the other ear. The point is that from my desk I get most of a profile or three-quarters, but I get the one in the red leather chair full face, and I like a view. Not that Adele Bosley was a pin-up, and she must have been in the fifth or sixth grade when Clara James was born, but her smooth tanned skin and pretty mouth and nice brown eyes were good scenery.

Rupert Grove didn't shake hands, which didn't upset me. He may have been a good manager for

Alberto Mion's affairs, but not for his own physique. A man can be fat and still have integrity—as, for instance, Falstaff or Nero Wolfe—but that bird had lost all sense of proportion. His legs were short, and it was all in the middle third of him. If you wanted to be polite and look at his face you had to concentrate. I did so, since I needed to size them all up, and saw nothing worthy of recording but a pair of shrewd and shifty black eyes.

When these two were seated and provided with liquid, Wolfe fired the starting gun. He said he was sorry it had been necessary to ask them to exert themselves on a hot evening, but that the question at issue could be answered fairly and equitably only if all concerned had a voice in it. The responding murmurs went all the way from acquiescence to extreme irritation. Judge Arnold said belligerently that there was no question at legal issue because Alberto Mion was dead.

"Nonsense," Wolfe said curtly. "If that were true you, a lawyer, wouldn't have bothered to come. Anyway, the purpose of this meeting is to keep it from becoming a legal issue. Four of you telephoned Mrs. Mion today to ask if I am acting for her, and were told that I am. On her behalf I want to collect the facts. I may as well tell you, without prejudice to her, that she will accept my recommendation. Should I decide that a large sum is due her you may of course contest; but if I form the opinion that she has no claim she will bow to it. Under that responsibility I need all the facts. Therefore—"

"You're not a court," Arnold snapped.

"No, sir, I'm not. If you prefer it in a court you'll get it." Wolfe's eyes moved. "Miss Bosley, would your employers welcome that kind of publicity? Dr. Lloyd, would you rather appear as an expert on the witness stand or talk it over here? Mr. Grove, how would your client feel about it if he were alive? Mr. James, what do you think? You wouldn't relish the publicity either, would you? Particularly since your daughter's name would appear?"

"Why would her name appear?" James demanded in his trained baritone.

Wolfe turned up a palm. "It would be evidence. It would be established that just before you struck Mr. Mion you said to him, 'You let my daughter alone, you bastard.'"

I put my hand in my pocket. I have a rule, justified by experience, that whenever a killer is among those present, or may be, a gun must be handy. Not regarding the back of the third drawer of my desk, where they are kept, as handy enough, the routine is to transfer one to my pocket before guests gather. That was the pocket I put my hand in, knowing how cocky James was. But he didn't leave his chair. He merely blurted, "That's a lie!"

Wolfe grunted. "Ten people heard you say it. That would indeed be publicity, if you denied it under oath and all ten of them, subpoenaed to testify, contradicted you. I honestly think it would be better to discuss it with me."

"What do you want to know?" Judge Arnold demanded.

"The facts. First, the one already moot. When I lie I like to know it. Mr. Grove, you were present when that famous blow was struck. Have I quoted Mr. James correctly?"

"Yes." Grove's voice was a high tenor.

"You heard him say that?"

"Yes."

"Miss Bosley. Did you?"

She looked uncomfortable. "Wouldn't it be better to—"

"Please. You're not under oath, but I'm merely collecting facts, and I was just told I lied. Did you hear him say that?"

"Yes, I did." Adele's eyes went to James. "I'm sorry, Giff."

"But it's not true!" Clara James cried.

Wolfe rasped at her, "We're all lying?"

I could have warned her, when she gave me that glance in the hall, to look out for him. Not only was she a sophisticated young woman, and not only did she glisten, but her slimness was the kind that comes from not eating enough, and Wolfe absolutely cannot stand people who don't eat enough. I knew he would be down on her from the start.

But she came back at him. "I don't mean that," she said scornfully. "Don't be so touchy! I mean I had lied to my father. What he thought about Alberto and me wasn't true. I was just bragging to him because—it doesn't matter why. Anyway, what I told him wasn't true, and I told him so that night!"

"Which night?"

"When we got home—from the stage party after *Rigoletto*. That was where my father knocked Alberto down, you know, right there on the stage. When we got home I told him that what I had said about Alberto and me wasn't true."

"When were you lying, the first time or the second?"

"Don't answer that, my dear," Judge Arnold broke in, lawyering. He looked sternly at Wolfe. "This is all irrelevant. You're welcome to facts, but relevant facts. What Miss James told her father is immaterial."

Wolfe shook his head. "Oh, no." His eyes went from right to left and back again. "Apparently I haven't made it plain. Mrs. Mion wants me to decide for her whether she has a just claim, not so much legally as morally. If it appears that Mr. James's assault on Mr. Mion was morally justified that will be a factor in my decision."

He focused on Clara. "Whether my question was relevant or not, Miss James, I admit it was embarrassing and therefore invited mendacity. I withdraw it. Try this instead. Had you, prior to that stage party, given your father to understand that Mr. Mion had seduced you?"

"Well—" Clara laughed. It was a tinkly soprano laugh, rather attractive. "What a nice old-fashioned way to say it! Yes, I had. But it wasn't true."

"But you believed it, Mr. James?"

Gifford James was having trouble holding himself in, and I concede that such leading questions from a stranger about his daughter's honor must have been hard to take. But after all it wasn't new to the rest of the audience, and anyway it sure was relevant. He forced himself to speak with quiet dignity. "I believed what my daughter told me, yes."

Wolfe nodded. "So much for that," he said in a relieved tone. "I'm glad that part is over with." His eyes moved. "Now, Mr. Grove, tell me about the conference in Mr. Mion's studio, a few hours before he died."

Rupert the Fat had his head tilted to one side, with his shrewd black eyes meeting Wolfe's. "It was for the purpose," he said in his high tenor, "of discussing the demand Mion had made for payment of damages."

"You were there?"

"I was, naturally. I was Mion's adviser and manager. Also Miss Bosley, Dr. Lloyd, Mr. James, and Judge Arnold."

"Who arranged the conference, you?"

"In a way, yes. Judge Arnold suggested it, and I told Mion and phoned Dr. Lloyd and Miss Bosley."

"What was decided?"

"Nothing. That is, nothing definite. There was the question of the extent of the damage—how soon Mion would be able to sing again."

"What was your position?"

Grove's eyes tightened. "Didn't I say I was Mion's manager?"

"Certainly. I mean, what position did you take regarding the payment of damages?"

"I thought a preliminary payment of fifty thousand dollars should be made at once. Even if Mion's voice was soon all right he had already lost that and more. His South American tour had been canceled, and he had been unable to make a lot of records on contract —"

"Nothing like fifty thousand dollars," Judge Arnold asserted aggressively. There was nothing wrong with his larynx, small as he was. "I showed figures—"

"To hell with your figures! Anybody can—"

"Please!" Wolfe rapped on his desk with a knuckle. "What was Mr. Mion's position?"

"The same as mine, of course." Grove was scowling at Arnold as he spoke to Wolfe. "We had discussed it."

"Naturally." Wolfe's eyes went left. "How did you feel about it, Mr. James?"

"I think," Judge Arnold broke in, "that I should speak for my client. You agree, Giff?"

"Go ahead," the baritone muttered.

Arnold did, and took most of one of the three hours. I was surprised that Wolfe didn't stop him, and finally decided that he let him ramble on just to get additional support for his long-standing opinion of lawyers. If so, he got it.

Arnold covered everything. He had a lot to say about tort-feasors, going back a couple of centuries, with emphasis on the mental state of a tort-feasor. Another item he covered at length was proximate cause. He got really worked up about proximate cause, but it was so involved that I lost track.

Here and there, though, he made sense. At one point he said. "The idea of a preliminary payment, as they called it, was clearly inadmissible. It is not reasonable to expect a man, even if he stipulates an obligation, to make a payment thereon until either the total amount of the obligation, or an exact method of computing it, has been agreed upon."

At another point he said, "The demand for so large a sum can, in fact, be properly characterized as blackmail. They knew that if the action went to trial, and if we showed that my client's deed sprang from his knowledge that his daughter had been wronged, a jury would not be likely to award damages. But they also knew that we would be averse to making that defense."

"Not his knowledge," Wolfe objected. "Merely his belief. His daughter says she had misinformed him."

"We could have showed knowledge," Arnold insisted.

I looked at Clara with my brows up. She was being contradicted flatly on the chronology of her lie and her truth, but either she and her father didn't get the implication of it or they didn't want to get started on that again.

At another point Arnold said, "Even if my client's deed was tortious and damages would be collectible, the amount could not be agreed upon until the extent of the injury was known. We offered, without prejudice, twenty thousand dollars in full settlement, for a general release. They refused. They wanted a payment forthwith on account. We refused that on principle. In the end there was agreement on only one thing: that an effort should be made to arrive at the total amount of damage. Of course that was what Dr. Lloyd was there for. He was asked for a prognosis, and he stated that—but you don't need to take hearsay. He's here, and you can get it direct."

Wolfe nodded. "If you please, Doctor?"

I thought, my God, here we go again with another expert.

But Lloyd had mercy on us. He kept it down to our level and didn't take anything like an hour. Before he spoke he took another swallow from his third helping of bourbon and water with mint, which had smoothed out some of the lines on his handsome face and taken some of the worry from his eyes.

"I'll try to remember," he said slowly, "exactly what I told them. First, I described the damage the blow had done. The thyroid and arytenoid cartilages on the left side had been severely injured, and to a lesser extent the cricoid." He smiled—a superior smile, but not supercilious. "I waited two weeks, using indicated treatment, thinking an operation might not be required, but it was. When I got inside I confess I was relieved; it wasn't as bad as I had feared. It was a simple operation, and he healed admirably. I wouldn't have been risking much that day if I had given assurance that his voice would be as good as ever in two months, three at the most; but the larynx is an extremely delicate instrument, and a tenor like Mion's is a remarkable phenomenon, so I was cautious enough merely to say that I would be surprised and disappointed if he wasn't ready, fully ready, for the opening of the next opera season, seven months from then. I added that my hope and expectation were actually more optimistic than that."

Lloyd pursed his lips. "That was it, I think. Nevertheless, I welcomed the suggestion that my prognosis should be reinforced by Rentner's. Apparently it would be a major factor in the decision about the amount to be paid in damages, and I didn't want the sole responsibility."

"Rentner? Who was he?" Wolfe asked.

"Dr. Abraham Rentner of Mount Sinai," Lloyd replied, in the tone I would use if someone asked me who Mickey Mantle was. "I phoned him and made an appointment for the following morning."

"I insisted on it," Rupert the Fat said importantly. "Mion had a right to collect not sometime in the distant future, but then and there. They wouldn't pay unless a total was agreed on, and if we had to name a total I wanted to be damn sure it was enough. Don't forget that that day Mion couldn't sing a note."

"He wouldn't have been able to let out a pianissimo for at least two months," Lloyd bore him out. "I gave that as the minimum."

"There seems," Judge Arnold interposed, "to be an implication that we opposed the suggestion that a second professional opinion be secured. I must protest—"

"You did!" Grove squeaked.

"We did not!" Gifford James barked. "We merely—"

The three of them went at it, snapping and snarling. It seemed to me that they might have saved their energy for the big issue—was anything coming to Mrs. Mion and if so how much. But not those babies. Their main concern was to avoid the slightest risk of agreeing on anything at all.

Wolfe patiently let them get where they were headed for—nowhere—and then invited a new voice in. He turned to Adele and spoke.

"Miss Bosley, we haven't heard from you. Which side were you on?"

Adele Bosley had been taking it in, sipping occasionally at her rum Collins—her second one—and looking, I thought, pretty damn intelligent. Though it was the middle of August, she was the only one of the six who had a really good tan. Her public relations with the sun were excellent.

She shook her head. "I wasn't on either side, Mr. Wolfe. My only interest was that of my employer, the Metropolitan Opera Association. Naturally we wanted it settled privately, without any scandal. I had no opinion whatever on whether—on the point at issue."

"And expressed none?"

"No. I merely urged them to get it settled if possible."

"Fair enough!" Clara James blurted. It was a sneer. "You might have helped my father a little, since he got your job for you. Or had you—"

"Be quiet, Clara!" James told her with authority.

But she ignored him and finished it. "Or had you already paid in full for that?"

Judge Arnold looked pained. Rupert the Fat giggled. Dr. Lloyd took a gulp of bourbon and water.

In view of the mildly friendly attitude I was developing toward Adele I sort of hoped she would throw something at the slim and glistening Miss James, but all she did was appeal to the father. "Can't you handle the brat, Giff?"

Then, without waiting for an answer, she turned to Wolfe. "Miss James likes to use her imagination. What she implied is not on the record. Not anybody's record."

Wolfe nodded. "It wouldn't belong on this one anyhow." He made a face. "To go back to relevancies, what time did that conference break up?"

"Why—Mr. James and Judge Arnold left first, around four thirty. Then Dr. Lloyd, soon after. I stayed a few minutes with Mion and Mr. Grove, and then went."

"Where did you go?"

"To my office, on Broadway."

"How long did you stay at your office?"

She looked surprised. "I don't know—yes, I do too, of course. Until a little after seven. I had things to do, and I typed a confidential report of the conference at Mion's."

"Did you see Mion again before he died? Or phone him?"

"See him?" She was more surprised. "How could I? Don't you know he was found dead at seven o'clock. That was before I left the office."

"Did you phone him? Between four thirty and seven?"

"No." Adele was puzzled and slightly exasperated. It struck me that Wolfe was recklessly getting onto thin ice, mighty close to the forbidden subject of murder. Adele added, "I don't know what you're getting at."

"Neither do I," Judge Arnold put in with emphasis. He smiled sarcastically. "Unless it's force of habit with you, asking people where they were at the time a death by violence occurred. Why don't you go after all of us?"

"That's what I intend to do," Wolfe said imperturbably. "I would like to know why Mion decided to kill himself, because that has a bearing on the opinion I shall give his widow. I understand that two or three of you have said that he was wrought up when that conference ended, but not despondent. I know he committed suicide; the police can't be flummoxed on a thing like that. But why?"

"I doubt," Adele Bosley offered, "if you know how a singer—especially a great artist like Mion—how he feels when he can't let a sound out, when he can't even talk except in an undertone or a whisper. It's horrible."

"Anyway, you never knew with him," Rupert Grove contributed. "In rehearsal I've heard him do an aria like an angel and then rush out weeping because he thought he had slurred a release. One minute he was up in the sky and the next he was under a rug."

Wolfe grunted. "Nevertheless, anything said to him by anyone during the two hours preceding his suicide is pertinent to this inquiry—to establish Mrs. Mion's moral position. I want to know where you people were that day, after the conference up to seven o'clock, and what you did."

"My God." Judge Arnold threw up his hands. The hands came down again. "All right, it's getting late As Miss Bosley told you, my client and I left Mion's studio together. We went to the Churchill bar and drank and talked. A little later Miss James joined us, stayed long enough for a drink, I suppose half an hour, and left. Mr. James and I remained together until after seven. During that time neither of us communicated with Mion, nor arranged for anyone else to. I believe that covers it?"

"Thank you," Wolfe said politely "You corroborate, of course, Mr. James?"

"I do," the baritone said gruffly. "This is a lot of damn nonsense."

"It does begin to sound like it,"

Wolfe conceded. "Dr. Lloyd? If you don't mind?"

He hadn't better, since he had been mellowed by four ample helpings of our best bourbon, and he didn't. "Not at all," he said cooperatively. "I made calls on five patients, two on upper Fifth Avenue, one in the East Sixties, and two at the hospital. I got home a little after six and had just finished dressing after taking a bath when Fred Weppler phoned me about Mion. Of course I went at once."

"You hadn't seen Mion or phoned him?"

"Not since I left after the conference. Perhaps I should have, but I had no idea—I'm not a psychiatrist, but I was his doctor."

"He was mercurial, was he?"

"Yes, he was." Lloyd pursed his lips. "Of course, that's not a medical term."

"Far from it," Wolfe agreed. He shifted his gaze. "Mr. Grove, I don't have to ask you if you phoned Mion, since it is on record that you did. Around five o'clock?"

Rupert the Fat had his head tilted again. Apparently that was his favorite pose for conversing. He corrected Wolfe. "It was after five. More like a quarter past."

"Where did you phone from?"

"The Harvard Club."

I thought, I'll be damned, it takes all kinds to make a Harvard Club.

"What was said?"

"Not much." Grove's lips twisted. "It's none of your business, you know, but the others have obliged, so I'll string along. I had forgotten to ask him if he would endorse a certain product for a thousand dollars, and the agency wanted an answer. We talked less than three minutes. First, he said he wouldn't, then he said he would. That was all."

"Did he sound like a man getting ready to kill himself?"

"Not in the slightest. He was glum, but naturally; since he still couldn't sing and couldn't expect to for at least two months."

"After you phoned Mion what did you do?"

"I stayed at the club. I ate dinner there and hadn't quite finished when the news came that Mion had killed himself. So I'm still behind that ice cream and coffee."

"That's too bad. When you phoned Mion, did you again try to persuade him not to press his claim against Mr. James?"

Grove's head straightened up. "Did I what?" he demanded.

"You heard me," Wolfe said rudely. "What's surprising about it? Naturally Mrs. Mion has informed me, since I'm working for her. You were opposed to Mion's asking for payment in the first place and tried to talk him out of it. You said the publicity would be so harmful that it wasn't worth it. He demanded that you support the claim and threatened to cancel your contract if you refused. Isn't that correct?"

"It is not." Grove's black eyes were blazing. "It wasn't like that at all! I merely gave him my opinion. When it was decided to make the claim I went along." His voice went up a notch higher, though I wouldn't have thought it possible. "I certainly did!"

"I see." Wolfe wasn't arguing. "What is your opinion now, about Mrs. Mion's claim?"

"I don't think she has one. I don't believe she can collect. If I were in James's place I certainly wouldn't pay her a cent."

Wolfe nodded. "You don't like her, do you?"

"Frankly, I don't. No. I never have. Do I have to like her?"

"No, indeed. Especially since she doesn't like you either." Wolfe shifted in his chair and leaned back. I could tell from the line of his lips, straightened out, that the next item on the agenda was one he didn't care for, and I understood why when I saw his eyes level at Clara James. I'll bet that if he had known that he would have to be dealing with that type he wouldn't have taken the job. He spoke to her, testily. "Miss James, you've heard what has been said?"

"I was wondering," she complained, as if she had been holding in a grievance, "if you were going to go on ignoring me. I was around too, you know."

"I know. I haven't forgotten you." His tone implied that he wished he could. "When you had a drink in the Churchill bar with your father and Judge Arnold, why did they send you up to Mion's studio to see him?"

Arnold and James protested at once, loudly and simultaneously. Wolfe, paying no attention to them, waited to hear Clara, her voice having been drowned by theirs.

". . . nothing to do with it," she was finishing. "I sent myself."

"It was your own idea?"

"Entirely. I have one once in a while, all alone."

"What did you go for?"

"You don't need to answer, my dear," Arnold told her.

She ignored him. "They told me what had happened at the conference, and I was mad. I thought it was a holdup—but I wasn't going to tell Alberto that. I thought I could talk him out of it."

"You went to appeal to him for old times' sake?"

She looked pleased. "You have the nicest way of putting things! Imagine a girl my age having old times!"

"I'm glad you like my diction, Miss James." Wolfe was furious. "Anyhow, you went. Arriving at a quarter past six?"

"Just about, yes."

"Did you see Mion?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He wasn't there. At least—" She stopped. Her eyes weren't glistening quite so much. She went on, "That's what I thought then. I went to the thirteenth floor and rang the bell at the door to the studio. It's a loud bell—he had it loud to be heard above his voice and the piano when he was practicing—but I couldn't hear it from the hall because the door is soundproofed too, and after I had pushed the button a few times I wasn't sure the bell was ringing, so I knocked on the door. I like to finish anything I start, and I thought he must be there, so I rang the bell some more and took off my shoe and pounded on the door with the heel.

"Then I went down to the twelfth floor by the public stairs and rang the bell at the apartment door. That was really stupid, because I know how Mrs. Mion hates me, but anyway I did. She came to the door and said she thought Alberto was up in the studio, and I said he wasn't, and she shut the door in my face. I went home and mixed myself a drink—which reminds me, I must admit this is good Scotch, though I never heard of it before."

She lifted her glass and jiggled it to swirl the ice. "Any questions?"

"No," Wolfe growled. He glanced at the clock on the wall and then along the line of faces. "I shall certainly report to Mrs. Mion," he told them, "that you were not grudging with the facts."

"And what else?" Arnold inquired.

"I don't know. We'll see."

That they didn't like. I wouldn't have supposed anyone could name a subject on which those six characters would have been in unanimous accord, but Wolfe turned the trick in five words. They wanted a verdict; failing that, an opinion; failing that, at least a hint.

Adele Bosley was stubborn, Rupert the Fat was so indignant he squeaked, and Judge Arnold was next door to nasty. Wolfe was patient up to a point, but finally stood up and told them good night.

The note it ended on was such that before going not one of them shelled out a word of appreciation for all the refreshment, not even Adele, the expert on public relations, or Dr. Lloyd, who had practically emptied the bourbon bottle.

With the front door locked and bolted for the night, I returned to the office. To my astonishment Wolfe was still on his feet, standing over by the bookshelves, glaring at the spines.

"Restless?" I asked courteously.

He turned and said aggressively, "I want another bottle of beer."

"Nuts. You've had five since dinner." I didn't bother to put much feeling into it, as the routine was familiar. He had himself set the quota of five bottles between dinner and bedtime, and usually stuck to it, but when anything sent his humor far enough down he liked to shift the responsibility so he could be sore at me too.

It was just part of my job. "Nothing doing," I said firmly. "I counted 'em. Five. What's the trouble, a whole evening gone and still no murderer?"

"Bah." He compressed his lips. "That's not it. If that were all we could close it up before going to bed. It's that confounded gun with wings." He gazed at me with his eyes narrowed, as if suspecting that I had wings too. "I could, of course, just ignore it—no. No, in view of the state our clients are in, it would be foolhardy. We'll have to clear it up. There's no alternative."

"That's a nuisance. Can I help any?"

"Yes. Phone Mr. Cramer first thing in the morning. Ask him to be here at eleven o'clock."

My brows went up. "But he's interested only in homocide. Do I tell him we've got one to show him?"

"No. Tell him I guarantee that it's worth the trouble." Wolfe took a step toward me. "Archie."

"Yes, sir."

"I've had a bad evening and I'll have another bottle."

"You will not. Not a chance." Fritz had come in and we were starting to clear up. "It's after midnight and you're in the way. Go to bed."

"One wouldn't hurt him," Fritz muttered.

"You're a help," I said bitterly. "I warn both of you, I've got a gun in my pocket. What a household!"

For nine months of the year Inspector Cramer of Homicide, big and broad and turning gray, looked the part well enough, but in the summer time the heat kept his face so red that he was a little gaudy. He knew it and didn't like it, and as a result he was harder to deal with in August than in January. If an occasion arises for me to commit a murder in Manhattan I hope it will be winter.

Tuesday at noon he sat in the red leather chair and looked at Wolfe with no geniality. Detained by another appointment, he hadn't been able to make it at eleven, the hour when Wolfe adjourns the morning session with his orchids up in the plant rooms.

Wolfe wasn't exactly beaming either, and I was looking forward to some vaudeville. Also, I was curious to see how Wolfe would go about getting dope on a murder from Cramer without spilling it that there had been one, as Cramer was by no means a nitwit.

"I'm on my way uptown," Cramer grumbled, "and haven't got much time."

That was probably a barefaced lie. He merely didn't want to admit that an Inspector of the NYPD would call on a private detective on request, even though it was Nero Wolfe and I had told him we had something hot.

"What is it," he grumbled on, "the Dickinson thing? Who brought you in?"

Wolfe shook his head. "No one,

thank heaven. It's about the murder of Alberto Mion."

I goggled at him. This was away beyond me. Right off he had let the dog loose, when I had thought the whole point was that there was no dog on the place.

"Mion?" Cramer wasn't interested. "Not one of mine."

"It soon will be. Alberto Mion, the famous opera singer. Four months ago, on April nineteenth. In his studio on East End Avenue. Shot—"

"Oh." Cramer nodded. "Yeah, I remember. But you're stretching it a little. It was suicide."

"No. It was first-degree murder."

Cramer regarded him for three breaths. Then, in no hurry, he got a cigar from his pocket, inspected it, and stuck it in his mouth. In a moment he took it out again.

"I have never known it to fail," he remarked, "that you can be counted on for a headache. Who says it was murder?"

"I have reached that conclusion."

"Then that's settled." Cramer's sarcasm was usually a little heavy. "Have you bothered any about evidence?"

"I have none."

"Good. Evidence just clutters a murder up." Cramer stuck the cigar back in his mouth and exploded, "When did you start keeping your sentences so damn short? Go ahead and talk!"

"Well—" Wolfe considered. "It's a little difficult. You're probably not familiar with the details, since it was so long ago and was recorded as suicide."

"I remember it fairly well. As you say, he was famous. Go right ahead."

Wolfe leaned back and closed his eyes. "Interrupt me if you need to. I had six people here for a talk last evening." He pronounced their names and identified them. "Five of them were present at a conference in Mion's studio which ended two hours before he was found dead. The sixth, Miss James, banged on the studio door at a quarter past six and got no reply, presumably because he was dead then. My conclusion that Mion was murdered is based on things I have heard said. I'm not going to repeat them to you—because it would take too long, because it's a question of emphasis and interpretation, and because you have already heard them."

"I wasn't here last evening," Cramer said dryly.

"So you weren't. Instead of 'you,' I should have said the Police Department. It must all be in the files. They were questioned at the time it happened, and told their stories as they have told them to me. You can get it there. Have you ever known me to have to eat my words?"

"I've seen times when I would have liked to shove them down your throat."

"But you never have. Here are three more I shall not eat: Mion was murdered. I won't tell you, now, how I reached that conclusion; study your files."

Cramer was keeping himself under restraint. "I don't have to study them," he declared, "for one detail—how he was killed. Are you saying he fired the gun himself but was driven to it?"

"No. The murderer fired the gun."

"It must have been quite a murderer. It's quite a trick to pry a guy's mouth open and stick a gun in it without getting bit. Would you mind naming the murderer?"

Wolfe shook his head. "I haven't got that far yet. But it isn't the objection you raise that's bothering me; that can be overcome. It's something else." He leaned forward and was earnest. "Look here. It would not have been impossible for me to see this through alone, deliver the murderer and the evidence to you, and flap my wings and crow. But first, I have no ambition to expose you as a zany, since you're not; and second, I need your help. I am not now prepared to prove to you that Mion was murdered; I can only assure you that he was, and repeat that I won't have to eat it—and neither will you. Isn't that enough, at least to arouse your interest?"

Cramer stopped chewing the cigar. He never lit one. "Sure," he said grimly. "Hell, I'm interested. Another first-class headache. I'm flattered you want me to help. How?"

"I want you to arrest two people as material witnesses, question them, and let them out on bail."

"Which two? Why not all six?" I warned you his sarcasm was hefty.

"But"—Wolfe ignored it—"under clearly defined conditions. They must not know that I am responsible; they must not even know that I have spoken with you. The arrests should be made late this afternoon or early evening, so they'll be kept in custody all night and until they arrange for bail in the morning. The bail need not be high; that's not important. The questioning should be fairly prolonged and severe, not merely a gesture, and if they get little or no sleep so much the better. Of course this sort of thing is routine for you."

"Yeah, we do it constantly." Cramer's tone was unchanged. "But when we ask for a warrant we like to have a fairly good excuse. We wouldn't like to put down that it's to do Nero Wolfe a favor. I don't want to be contrary."

"There's ample excuse for these two. They *are* material witnesses."

"You haven't named them. Who are they?"

"The man and woman who found the body, Mr. Frederick Weppler, the music critic, and Mrs. Mion, the widow."

This time I didn't goggle, but I

had to catch myself quick. It was a first if there ever was one. Time and again I have seen Wolfe go far—on a few occasions much too far—to keep a client from being pinched. He regards it as an unbearable personal insult. And here he was practically begging the law to haul Fred and Peggy in, when I had deposited her check for five grand only the day before!

"Oh," Cramer said. "Them?"

"Yes, sir," Wolfe assured him. "As you know or can learn from the files, there is plenty to ask them about. Mr. Weppler was there for lunch that day, with others, and when the others left he remained with Mrs. Mion. What was discussed? What did they do that afternoon? Where were they? Why did Mr. Weppler return to the Mion apartment at seven o'clock? Why did he and Mrs. Mion ascend together to the studio? After finding the body, why did Mr. Weppler go downstairs before notifying the police to get a list of names from the doorman and elevator man? An extraordinary performance. Was it Mion's habit to take an afternoon nap? Did he sleep with his mouth open?"

"Much obliged," Cramer said not gratefully. "You're a wonder at thinking of questions to ask. But even if Mion did take naps with his mouth open, I doubt if he did it standing up. And after the bullet left his head it went up to the ceiling, as I remember it. Now." Cramer put his palms on the arms of the chair. "Who's your client?"

"No," Wolfe said regretfully. "I'm not ready to disclose that."

"I thought not. In fact, there isn't one single damn thing you have disclosed. You've got no evidence, or if you have any you're keeping it under your belt. You've got a conclusion you like, that will help a client you won't name, and you want me to test it for you by arresting two reputable citizens and giving them the works. I've seen samples of your nerve before, but this is tops!"

"I've told you I won't eat it, and neither will you. If—"

"You'd eat one of your own orchids to earn a fee!"

That started the fireworks. I have sat many times and listened to that pair in a slugging match and enjoyed every minute of it, but this one got so hot that I wasn't exactly sure I was enjoying it. At 12:40 Cramer was on his feet, starting to leave. A 12:45 he was back in the red leather chair, shaking his fist and snarling. At 12:48 Wolfe was leaning back with his eyes shut, pretending he was deaf. At 12:52 he was pounding his desk and bellowing.

At ten past one it was all over. Cramer had taken it and was gone. He had made a condition—that there would first be a check of the record and a staff talk; but that didn't matter, since the arrests were to be postponed until after judges had gone home. He accepted the proviso that the victims were not to know that Wolfe had a hand in it, so it could have been said that he was knuckling under, but actually he was merely using horse sense.

No matter how much he discounted Wolfe's three words that were not to be eaten—and he knew from experience how risky it was to discount Wolfe just for the hell of it—they made it fairly probable that it wouldn't hurt to give Mion's death another look; and in that case a session with the couple who had found the body was as good a way to start as any. As a matter of fact, the only detail that Cramer choked on was Wolfe's refusal to tell who his client was.

As I followed Wolfe into the dining room for lunch I remarked to his outspread back, "There are already eight hundred and nine people in the metropolitan area who would like to poison you. This will make it eight hundred and eleven. Don't think they won't find out sooner or later."

"Of course they will," he conceded, pulling his chair back. "But too late."

The rest of that day and evening nothing happened at all, as far as we knew.

I was at my desk in the office at 10:40 the next morning when the phone rang. I got it and told the transmitter, "Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"I want to talk to Mr. Wolfe."

"He won't be available until eleven o'clock. Can I help?"

"This is urgent. This is Weppler, Frederick Weppler. I'm in a booth in a drug store on Ninth Avenue near Twentieth Street. Mrs. Mion is with me. We've been arrested."

"Good God!" I was horrified. "What for?"

"To ask us about Mion's death. They had material witness warrants. They kept us all night, and we just got out on bail. I had a lawyer arrange for the bail, but I don't want him to know that we consulted Wolfe, and he's not with us. We want to see Wolfe."

"You sure do," I agreed emphatically. "It's a damn outrage. Come on up here. He'll be down from the plant rooms by the time you arrive. Grab a taxi"

"We can't. That's why I'm phoning. We're being followed by two detectives and we don't want them to know we're seeing Wolfe. How can we shake them?"

It would have saved time and energy to tell him to come ahead, that a couple of official tails needn't worry him, but I thought I'd better play along.

"For God's sake," I said, disgusted. "Cops give me a pain in the neck. Listen. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"Go to the Feder Paper Company, five thirty-five West Seventeenth Street. In the office ask for

Mr. Sol Feder. Tell him your name is Montgomery. He'll conduct you along a passage that exits on Eighteenth Street. Right there, either at the curb or double-parked, will be a taxi with a handkerchief on the door handle. I'll be in it. Don't lose any time climbing in. Have you got it?"

"I think so. You'd better repeat the address."

I did so, and told him to wait ten minutes before starting, to give me time to get there. Then, after hanging up, I phoned Sol Feder to instruct him, got Wolfe on the house phone to inform him, and beat it.

I should have told him to wait fifteen or twenty minutes instead of ten, because I got to my post on Eighteenth Street barely in time. My taxi had just stopped, and I was reaching out to tie my handkerchief on the door handle when they came across the sidewalk. I swung the door wide, and Fred practically threw Peggy in and dived in after her.

"Okay, driver," I said sternly, "you know where," and we rolled.

As we swung into Tenth Avenue I asked if they had had breakfast and they said yes, not with any enthusiasm. The fact is, they looked as if they were entirely out of enthusiasm. Peggy's lightweight green jacket, which she had on over a tan cotton dress, was rumpled and not very clean, and her face looked neglected. Fred's hair might not have been combed for a month, and his brown tropical worsted was anything but natty. They sat holding hands, and about once a minute Fred twisted around to look through the rear window.

"We're loose all right," I assured him. "I've been saving Sol Feder just for an emergency like this."

It was only a five-minute ride. When I ushered them into the office Wolfe was there in his big custom-made chair behind his desk. He arose to greet them, invited them to set, asked if they had breakfast properly, and said that the news of their arrest had been an unpleasant shock.

"One thing," Fred blurted, still standing. "We came to see you and consult you in confidence, and forty-eight hours later we were arrested. Was that pure coincidence?"

Wolfe finished getting himself re-established in his chair. "That won't help us any, Mr. Weppler," he said without resentment. "If that's your frame of mind you'd better go somewhere and cool off. You and Mrs. Mion are my clients. An insinuation that I am capable of acting against the interests of a client is too childish for discussion. What did the police ask you about?"

But Fred wasn't satisfied. "You're not a double-crosser," he conceded, "I know that. But what about Goodwin here? He may not be a double-crosser either, but he might have got careless in conversation with someone."

Wolfe's eyes moved. "Archie. Did you?"

"No, sir. But he can postpone asking my pardon. They've had a hard night." I looked at Fred. "Sit down and relax. If I had a careless tongue I wouldn't last at this job a week."

"It's damn funny," Fred persisted. He sat. "Mrs. Mion agrees with me. Don't you, Peggy?"

Peggy, in the red leather chair, gave him a glance and then looked back at Wolfe. "I did, I guess," she confessed. "Yes, I did. But now that I'm here, seeing you—" She made a gesture. "Oh, forget it! There's no one else to go to. We know lawyers, of course, but we don't want to tell a lawyer what we know—about the gun. We've already told you. But now the police suspect something, and we're out on bail, and you've got to do something!"

"What did you find out Monday evening?" Fred demanded. "You stalled when I phoned yesterday. What did they say?"

"They recited facts," Wolfe replied. "As I told you on the phone, I made some progress. I have nothing to add to that—now. But I want to know, I *must* know, what line the police took with you. Did they know what you told me about the gun?"

They shook their heads.

Wolfe grunted. "Then I might reasonably ask that you withdraw your insinuation that I or Mr. Goodwin betrayed you. What did they ask about?"

The answers to that took a good half hour. The cops hadn't missed a thing that was included in the picture as they knew it, and, with instructions from Cramer to make it thorough, they hadn't left a scrap. Far from limiting it to the day of Mion's death, they had been particularly curious about Peggy's and Fred's feelings and actions during the months prior and subsequent thereto.

Several times I had to take the tip of my tongue between my teeth to keep from asking the clients why they hadn't told the cops to go soak their heads, but I really knew why: they had been scared. A scared man is only half a man. By the time they finished reporting on their ordeal I was feeling sympathetic, and even a little guilty on behalf of Wolfe, when suddenly he snapped me out of it.

He said abruptly, "Archie. Draw a check to the order of Mrs. Mion for five thousand dollars."

They gawked at him. I got up and headed for the safe. They demanded to know what the idea was. I stood at the safe door to listen.

"I'm quitting," Wolfe said curtly. "I can't stand you. I told you Sunday that one or both of you were lying, and you stubbornly denied it. I undertook to work around your lie, and I did my best. But now that the police have got curious about Mion's death, and specifically about you, I refuse any longer to risk it. I am willing to be a Don Quixote, but not a chump.

"In breaking with you, I should tell you that I shall immediately inform Inspector Cramer of all that you have told me, and also warn you that he knows me well and will believe me. If, when the police start the next round with you, you are fools enough to contradict me, heaven knows what will happen. Your best course will be to acknowledge the truth and let them pursue the investigation you hired me for; but I should also warn you that they are not simpletons and they too will know that you are lying—at least one of you. Archie, what are you standing there gaping for? Get the check book."

I opened the safe door.

Neither of them had uttered a peep. I suppose they were too tired to react normally. As I returned to my desk they just sat, looking at each other. As I started making the entry on the stub, Fred's voice came.

"You can't do this. This isn't ethical."

"Pfui." Wolfe snorted. "You hire me to get you out of a fix, and lie to me about it, and talk of ethics! Incidentally, I did make progress Monday evening. I cleared everything up but two details, but the devil of it is that one of them depends on you. I have to know who put that gun on the floor beside the body. I am convinced that it was one of you, but you won't admit it. So I'm helpless, and that's a pity, because I am also convinced that neither of you was involved in Mion's death. If there were—"

"What's that?" Fred demanded. There was nothing wrong with his reaction now. "You're convinced that neither of us was involved?"

"I am."

Fred was out of his chair. He went to Wolfe's desk, put his palms on it, leaned forward and said harshly, "Do you mean that? Look at me. Open your eyes and look at me! Do you mean that?"

"Yes," Wolfe told him. "Certainly I mean it."

Fred gazed at him another moment and then straightened up. "All right," he said, the harshness gone. "I put the gun on the floor."

A wail came from Peggy. She sailed out of her chair and to him and seized his arm with both hands. "Fred! No! Fred! she pleaded. I wouldn't have thought her capable of wailing, but of course she was tired to begin with.

He put a hand on top of hers and then decided that was inadequate and took her in his arms. For a minute he concentrated on her. Finally he turned his face to Wolfe and spoke.

"I may regret this, but if I do you will too. By God, you will." He was quite positive of it. "All right, I lied. I put the gun on the floor. Now it's up to you." He held the other client closer. "I did, Peggy.

Don't say I should have told you—maybe I should—but I couldn't. It'll be all right, dearest, really it will—"

"Sit down," Wolfe said crossly. After a moment he made it an order. "Confound it, sit down!"

Peggy freed herself, Fred letting her go, and returned to her chair and dropped into it. Fred perched on its arm, with a hand on her far shoulder, and she put her hand up to his. Their eyes, suspicious, afraid, defiant, and hopeful all at once, were on Wolfe.

He stayed cross. "I assume," he said, "that you see how it is. You haven't impressed me. I already knew one of you had put the gun there. How could anyone else have entered the studio during those few minutes? The truth you have told me will be worse than useless, it will be extremely dangerous, unless you follow it with more truth. Try another lie and there's no telling what will happen; I might not be able to save you. Where did you find it?"

"Don't worry," Fred said quietly. "You've screwed it out of me and you'll get it straight. When we went in and found the body I saw the gun where Mion always kept it—on the base of Caruso's bust. Mrs. Mion didn't see it; she didn't look that way. When I left her in her bedroom I went back up. I picked the gun up by the trigger guard and smelled it; it had been fired. I put it on the floor by the body, returned to the apartment, went out, and took the elevator to the ground floor. The rest was just as I told you on Sunday."

Wolfe grunted. "You may have been in love, but you didn't think much of her intelligence. You assumed that after killing him she hadn't had the wit to leave the gun where he might have dropped—"

"I did not, damn you!"

"Nonsense. Of course you did. Who else would you have wanted to shield? And afterwards it got you in a pickle. When you had to agree with her that the gun hadn't been there when you and she entered, you were hobbled. You didn't dare tell her what you had done because of the implication that you suspected her, especially when she seemed to be suspecting you. You couldn't be sure whether she really did suspect you, or whether she was only—"

"I never did suspect him," Peggy said firmly. It was a job to make her voice firm, but she managed it. "And he never suspected me, not really. We just weren't sure—sure all the way down—and when you're in love and want it to last you've got to be sure."

"That was it," Fred agreed. They were looking at each other. "That was it exactly."

"All right, I'll take this," Wolfe said curtly. "I think you've told the truth, Mr. Weppler."

"I know damn well I have."

Wolfe nodded. "You sound like

it. I have a good ear for the truth. Now take Mrs. Mion home. I've got to work, but first I must think it over. As I said, there were two details, and you've disposed of only one. You can't help with the other. Go home and eat something."

"Who wants to eat?" Fred demanded fiercely. "We want to know what you're going to do!"

"I've got to brush my teeth," Peggy stated. I shot her a glance of admiration and affection. Women's saying things like that at times like that is one of the reasons I enjoy their company. No man alive, under those circumstances, would have felt that he had to brush his teeth and said so.

Besides, it made it easier to get rid of them without being rude. Fred tried to insist that they had a right to know what the program was, and to help consider the prospects, but was finally compelled to accept Wolfe's mandate that when a man hired an expert the only authority he kept was the right to fire. That, combined with Peggy's longing for a toothbrush and Wolfe's assurance that he would keep them informed, got them on their way without a ruckus.

When, after letting them out, I returned to the office, Wolfe was drumming on his desk blotter with the paperknife, scowling at it, though I had told him a hundred times that it ruined the blotter. I got the check book and replaced it in the safe, having put nothing on the stub but the date, so no harm was done.

"Twenty minutes till lunch," I announced, swiveling my chair and sitting. "Will that be enough to hogtie the second detail?"

No reply.

I refused to be sensitive. "If you don't mind," I inquired pleasantly, "what is the second detail?"

Again no reply, but after a moment he dropped the paperknife, leaned back, and sighed clear down.

"That confounded gun," he growled. "How did it get from the floor to the bust? Who moved it?"

I stared at him. "My God," I complained, "you're hard to satisfy. You've just had two clients arrested and worked like a dog getting the gun *from* the bust *to* the floor. Now you want to get it from the floor to the bust again? What the hell!"

"Not again. Prior to."

"Prior to what?"

"To the discovery of the body." His eyes slanted at me. "What do you think of this? A man—or a woman, no matter which—entered the studio and killed Mion in a manner that would convey a strong presumption of suicide. He or she deliberately planned it that way; it's not as difficult as the traditional police theory assumes. Then he or she placed the gun on the base of the bust, twenty feet away from the body, and departed. What do you think of it?"

"I don't think; I know. It didn't happen that way, unless he suddenly went batty after he pulled the trigger, which seems far-fetched."

"Precisely. Having planned it to look like suicide, the murderer placed the gun on the floor near the body. That is not discussible. But Mr. Weppler found it on the bust. Who took it from the floor and put it there, and when and why?"

"Yeah." I scratched my nose. "That's annoying. I'll admit the question is relevant and material, but why the hell do you let it in? Why don't you let it lay? Get him or her pinched, indicted, and tried. The cops will testify that the gun was there on the floor, and that will suit the jury fine, since it was framed for suicide. Verdict, provided you've sewed up things like motive and opportunity, guilty." I waved a hand. "Simple. Why bring up at all about the gun being so fidgety?"

Wolfe grunted. "The clients. I have to earn my fee. They want their minds cleared, and they know the gun wasn't on the floor when they discovered the body. For the jury, I can't leave it that the gun was on the bust, and for the clients I can't leave it that it stayed on the floor where the murderer put it. Having, through Mr. Weppler, got it from the bust to the floor, I must now go back and get it from the floor to the bust. You see that?"

"Only too plain." I whistled for help. "I'll be damned. How're you coming on?"

"I've just started." He sat up straight. "But I must clear my own mind, for lunch. Please hand me Mr. Shanks's orchid catalogue."

That was all for the moment, and during meals Wolfe excludes business not only from the conversation but also from the air. After lunch he returned to the office and got comfortable in his chair. For a while he just sat, and then began pushing his lips out and in, and I knew he was doing hard labor.

Having no idea how he proposed to move the gun from the floor to the bust, I was wondering how long it might take, and whether he would have to get Cramer to arrest someone else, and if so who. I have seen him sit there like that, working, for hours on end, but this time twenty minutes did it. It wasn't three o'clock when he pronounced my name gruffly and opened his eyes.

"Archie."

"Yes, sir."

"I can't do this. You'll have to."

"You mean dope it? I'm sorry, I'm busy."

"I mean execute it." He made a face. "I will not undertake to handle that young woman. It would be an ordeal, and I might botch it. It's just the thing for you. Your notebook. I'll dictate a document and then we'll discuss it."

"Yes, sir. I wouldn't call Miss Bosley really young."

"Not Miss Bosley. Miss James."

"Oh." I got the notebook.

At a quarter past four, Wolfe having gone up to the plant rooms for his afternoon session with the orchids, I sat at my desk, glowering at the phone, feeling the way I imagine Roger Maris feels when he strikes out with the bases full. I had phoned Clara James to ask her to come for a ride with me in the convertible, and she had pushed my nose in.

If that sounds as if I like myself beyond reason, not so. I am quite aware that I bat close to a thousand on invitations to damsels only because I don't issue one unless the circumstances strongly indicate that it will be accepted. But that has got me accustomed to hearing yes, and therefore it was a rude shock to listen to her unqualified no.

I concocted three schemes and rejected them, concocted a fourth and bought it, reached for the phone, and dialed the number again. Clara's voice answered, as it had before. As soon as she learned who it was she got impatient.

"I told you I had a cocktail date! Please don't—"

"Hold it," I told her bluntly. "I made a mistake. I was being kind. I wanted to get you out into the nice open air before I told you the bad news. I—"

"What bad news?"

"A woman just told Mr. Wolfe and me that there are five people besides her, and maybe more, who know you had a key to Alberto Mion's studio door."

Silence. Sometimes silences irritate me, but I didn't mind this one. Finally her voice came, totally different. "It's a silly lie. Who told you?"

"I forget. And I'm not discussing it on the phone. Two things and two only. First, if this gets around, what about your banging on the door for ten minutes, trying to get in, while he was in there dead? When you had a key? It would make even a cop skeptical. Second, meet me at the Churchill bar at five sharp and we'll talk it over. Yes or no."

"But this is so—you're so—"

"Hold it. No good. Yes or no."

Another silence, shorter, and then, "Yes," and she hung up.

I never keep a woman waiting and saw no reason to make an exception of this one, so I got to the Churchill bar eight minutes ahead of time. It was spacious, air-conditioned, well-fitted in all respects, and even in the middle of August well-fitted also in the matter of customers, male and female.

I strolled through, glancing around but not expecting her yet, and was surprised when I heard my name and saw her in a booth. Of course she hadn't had far to come, but even so she had wasted no time. She already had a drink and it was nearly gone. I joined her and immediately a waiter was there.

"You're having?" I asked her.

"Scotch on the rocks."

I told the waiter to bring two and he went.

She leaned forward at me and began in a breath, "Listen, this is absolutely silly, you just tell me who told you that, why, it's absolutely crazy—"

"Wait a minute." I stopped her more with my eyes than my words. Hers were glistening at me. "That's not the way to start, because it won't get us anywhere." I got a paper from my pocket and unfolded it. It was a neatly typed copy of the document Wolfe had dictated. "The quickest and easiest way will be for you to read this first, then you'll know what it's about."

I handed her the paper. You might as well read it while she does. It was dated that day:

I, Clara James, hereby declare that on Tuesday, April 19, I entered the apartment house at 620 East End Avenue, New York City, at or about 6:15 p.m., and took the elevator to the 13th floor. I rang the bell at the door of the studio of Alberto Mion. No one came to the door and there was no sound from within.

The door was not quite closed. It was not open enough to show a crack, but was not latched or locked. After ringing again and getting no response. I opened the door and entered.

Albert Mion's body was lying on the floor near the piano. He was dead. There was a hole in the top of his head. There was no question whether he was dead. I got dizzy and had to sit down on the floor and put my head down to keep from fainting. I didn't touch the body. There was a revolver on the floor, not far from the body, and I picked it up.

I think I sat on the floor about five minutes, but it might have been a little more or less. When I got back on my feet and started for the door I became aware that the revolver was still in my hand. I placed it on the base of the bust of Caruso. Later I realized I shouldn't have done that, but at the time I was too shocked and dazed to know what I was doing.

I left the studio, pulling the door shut behind me, went down the public stairs to the twelfth floor, and rang the bell at the door of the Mion apartment. I intended to tell Mrs. Mion about it, but when she appeared there in the doorway it was impossible to get it out. I couldn't tell her that her husband was up in the studio, dead.

Later, I regretted this, but I now see no reason to regret it or apologize for it, and I simply could not get the words out. I said I had wanted to see her husband, and had rung the bell at the studio and no one had answered. Then I rang for the elevator and went down to the street and went home.

Having been unable to tell Mrs. Mion, I told no one. I would have told my father, but he wasn't at home. I decided to wait until he returned and tell him, but before he came a friend telephoned me the news that Mion had killed himself, so I decided not to tell anyone, not even my father, that I had been in the studio, but to say that I had rung the bell and knocked on the door and got no reply. I thought that would make no difference, but it has now been explained to me that it does, and therefore I am stating it exactly as it happened.

As she got to the end the waiter came with the drinks, and she held the document against her chest as if it were a poker hand. Keeping it there with her left, she reached for the glass with her right and took a big swallow of scotch. I took a sip of mine to be sociable.

"It's a pack of lies," she said indignantly.

"It sure is," I agreed. "I have good ears, so keep your voice down. Mr. Wolfe is perfectly willing to give you a break, and anyhow it would be a job to get you to sign it if it told the truth. We are quite aware that the studio door was locked and you opened it with your key. Also that—no, listen to me a minute—also that you purposely picked up the gun and put it on the bust because you thought Mrs. Mion had killed him and left the gun there so it would look like suicide, and you wanted to mess it up for her. You couldn't—"

"Where were you?" she demanded scornfully. "Hiding behind the couch?"

"Nuts. If you didn't have a key why did you break a date to see me because of what I said on the phone? As for the gun, you couldn't have been dumber if you'd worked at it for a year. Who would believe anyone had shot him so it would look like suicide and then been fool enough to put the gun on the bust? Too dumb to believe, honest, but you did it."

She was too busy with her brain to resent being called dumb. Her frown creased her smooth pale forehead and took the glisten from her eyes. "Anyway," she protested, "what this says not only isn't true, it's impossible! They found the gun on the floor by his body, so this couldn't be true!"

"Yeah." I grinned at her. "It must have been a shock when you read that in the paper. Since you had personally moved the gun to the bust, how come they found it on the floor? Obviously someone had moved it back. I suppose you decided that Mrs. Mion had done that too, and it must have been hard to keep your mouth shut, but you had to. Now it's a little different. Mr. Wolfe knows who put the gun back on the floor and he can prove it. What's more, he knows Mion was murdered and he can prove that too. All that stops him is the detail of explaining how the gun got from the floor to the bust." I got out my fountain pen. "Put your name to that, and I'll witness it, and we're all set."

"You mean sign this thing?" She was contemptuous. "I'm not *that* dumb."

I caught the waiter's eye and signaled for refills, and then, to keep her company, emptied my glass.

I met her gaze, matching her frown. "Look, Blue Eyes," I told her reasonably. "I'm not sticking needles under your nails. I'm not saying we can prove you entered the studio—whether with your key or because the door wasn't locked doesn't matter—and moved the gun. We know you did, since no one else could have and you were there at the right time, but I admit we can't prove it. However, I'm offering you a wonderful bargain."

I pointed the pen at her. "Just listen. All we want this statement for is to keep it in reserve, in case the person who put the gun back on the floor is fool enough to blab it, which is very unlikely. He would only be—"

"You say he?" she demanded.

"Make it he or she. As Mr. Wolfe says, the language could use another pronoun. He would only be making trouble for himself. If he doesn't spill it, and he won't, your statement won't be used at all, but we've got to have it in the safe in case he does. Another thing, if we have this statement we won't feel obliged to pass it along to the cops about your having had a key to the studio door. We wouldn't be interested in keys. Still another, you'll be saving your father a big chunk of dough. If you sign this statement we can clear up the matter of Mion's death, and if we do that I guarantee that Mrs. Mion will be in no frame of mind to push any claim against your father. She will be too busy with a certain matter."

I proffered the pen. "Go ahead and sign it."

She shook her head, but not with much energy because her brain was working again. Fully appreciating the fact that her thinking was not on the tournament level, I was patient. Then the refills came and there was a recess, since she couldn't be expected to think and drink all at once. But finally she fought her way through to the point I had aimed at.

"So you know," she declared with satisfaction.

"We know enough," I said darkly.

"You know she killed him. You know she put the gun back on the floor. I knew that too, I knew she must have. And now you can prove it? If I sign this you can prove it?"

Of course I could have covered it with double talk, but I thought what the hell. "We certainly can," I assured her. "With this statement we're ready to go. It's the missing link. Here's the pen."

She lifted her glass, drained it, put it down, and damned if she didn't shake her head again, this time with energy.

"No," she said flatly, "I won't." She extended a hand with the document in it. "I admit it's all true, and when you get her on trial if she says she put the gun back on the floor I'll come and swear to it that I put it on the bust, but I won't sign anything because once I signed something about an accident and my father made me promise that I would never sign anything again without showing it to him first. I could take it and show it to him and then sign it, and you could come for it tonight or tomorrow." She frowned. "Except that he knows I had a key, but I could explain that."

But she no longer had the document. I had reached and taken it. You are welcome to think I should have changed holds on her and gone on fighting, but you weren't there seeing and hearing her, and I was. I gave up. I got out my pocket notebook, tore out a page, and began writing on it.

"I could use another drink," she stated.

"In a minute," I mumbled, and went on writing, as follows:

To Nero Wolfe:

I hereby declare that Archie Goodwin has tried his best to persuade me to sign the statement you wrote, and explained its purpose to me, and I have told him why I must refuse to sign it.

"There," I said, handing it to her. "That won't be signing something; it's just stating that you refuse to sign something. The reason I've got to have it, Mr. Wolfe knows how beautiful girls appeal to me, especially sophisticated girls like you, and if I take that thing back to him unsigned he'll think I didn't even try. He might even fire me. Just write your name there at the bottom."

She read it over again and took the pen. She smiled at me, glistening. "You're not kidding me any," she said, not unfriendly. "I know when I appeal to a man. You think I'm cold and calculating."

"Yeah?" I made it a little bitter, but not too bitter. "Anyhow it's not the point whether you appeal to me but what Mr. Wolfe will think. It'll help a lot to have that. Much obliged." I took the paper from her and blew on her signature to dry it.

"I know when I appeal to a man," she repeated.

There wasn't another thing there I wanted, but I had practically promised to buy her another drink, so I did so.

It was after six when I got back to West Thirty-fifth Street, so Wolfe had finished in the plant rooms and was down in the office. I marched in and put the unsigned statement on his desk in front of him.

He grunted. "Well?"

I sat down and told him exactly how it had gone, up to the point where she had offered to take the document home and show it to her father.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but some of her outstanding qualities didn't show much in that crowd the other evening. I give this not as an excuse but merely a fact. Her mental operations could easily be carried on inside a hollowed-out pea. Knowing what you think of unsupported statements, and wanting to convince you of the truth of that one, I got evidence to back it up. Here's a paper she did sign."

I handed him the page I had torn from my notebook. He took a look at it and then cocked an eye at me.

"She signed this?"

"Yes, sir. In my presence."

"Indeed. Good. Satisfactory."

I acknowledged the tribute with a careless nod. It does not hurt my feelings when he says, "Satisfactory," like that.

"A bold easy hand," he said. "She used your pen?"

"Yes, sir."

"May I have it, please?"

I arose and handed it to him, together with a couple of sheets of typewriter paper, and stood and watched with interested approval as he wrote "Clara James" over and over again, comparing each attempt with the sample I had secured. Meanwhile, at intervals, he spoke.

"It's highly unlikely that anyone will ever see it—except our clients . . . That's better . . . There's time to phone all of them before dinner—first Mrs. Mion and Mr. Weppler—then the others . . . Tell them my opinion is ready on Mrs. Mion's claim against Mr. James . . . If they can come at nine this evening—if that's impossible tomorrow morning at eleven will do . . . then get Mr. Cramer . . . Tell him it might be well to bring one of his men along . . ."

He flattened the typed statement on his desk blotter, forged Clara James's name at the bottom, and compared it with the true signature which I had provided.

"Faulty, to an expert," he muttered, "but no expert will ever see it. For our clients, even if they know her writing, it will do nicely."

It took a solid hour on the phone to get it fixed for that evening, but I finally managed it. I never did catch up with Gifford James, but his daughter agreed to find him and deliver him. The others I tracked down myself.

The only ones that gave me an argument were the clients, especially Peggy Mion. She balked hard at sitting in at a meeting for the ostensible purpose of collecting from Gifford James, and I had to appeal to Wolfe. Fred and Peggy were invited to come ahead of the others for a private briefing and then decide whether to stay or not. She bought that.

They got there in time to help out with the after-dinner coffee. Peggy had presumably brushed her teeth and had a nap and a bath, and manifestly she had changed her clothes, but even so she did not sparkle. She was wary, weary, removed, and skeptical. She didn't say in so many words that she wished she had never gone near Nero Wolfe, but she might as well have.

I had a notion that Fred Weppler felt the same way about it but was being gallant and loyal. It was Peggy who had insisted on coming to Wolfe, and Fred didn't want her to feel that he thought she had made things worse instead of better.

They didn't perk up even when Wolfe showed them the statement with Clara James's name signed to it. They read it together, with her in the red leather chair and him perched on the arm.

They looked up together, at Wolfe.

"So what?" Fred demanded.

"My dear sir." Wolfe pushed his cup and saucer back. "My dear madam. Why did you come to me? Because the fact that the gun was not on the floor when you two entered the studio convinced you that Mion had not killed himself but had been murdered. If the circumstances had permitted you to believe that he had killed himself, you would be married by now and never have needed me. Very well. That is now precisely what the circumstances are. What more do you want? You wanted your minds cleared. I have cleared them."

Fred twisted his lips, tight.

"I don't believe it," Peggy said glumly.

"You don't believe this statement?" Wolfe reached for the document and put it in his desk drawer, which struck me as a wise precaution, since it was getting close to nine o'clock. "Do you think Miss James would sign a thing like that if it weren't true? Why would—"

"I don't mean that," Peggy said. "I mean I don't believe my husband killed himself, no matter where the gun was. I knew him too well. He would never have killed himself—*never.*" She twisted her head to look up at her fellow client. "Would he, Fred?"

"It's hard to believe," Fred admitted grudgingly.

"I see." Wolfe was caustic. "Then the job you hired me for was not as you described it. At least you must concede that I have satisfied you about the gun; you can't wiggle out of that. So that job's done, but now you want more. You want a murder disclosed, which means, of necessity, a murderer caught. You want—"

"I only mean," Peggy insisted forlornly, "that I don't believe he killed himself, and nothing would make me believe it. I see now what I really—"

The doorbell sounded, and I went to answer it.

So the clients stayed for the party.

There were ten guests altogether: the six who had been there Monday evening, the two clients, Inspector Cramer, and my old friend and enemy, Sergeant Purley Stebbins. What made it unusual was that the dumbest one of the lot, Clara James, was the only one who had a notion of what was up, unless she had told her father, which I doubted. She had the advantage of the lead I had given her at the Churchill bar.

Adele Bosley, Dr. Lloyd, Rupert Grove, Judge Arnold, and Gifford James had had no reason to suppose there was anything on the agenda but the damage claim against James, until they got there and were made acquainted with Inspector Cramer and Sergeant Stebbins. God only knew what they thought then; one glance at their faces was enough to show *they* didn't know.

And as for Cramer and Stebbins, they had had enough experience of Nero Wolfe to be aware that almost certainly fur was going to fly, but whose and how and when?

And as for Fred and Peggy, even after the arrival of the law, they probably thought that Wolfe was going to get Mion's suicide pegged down by producing Clara's statement and disclosing what Fred had told us about moving the gun from the bust to the floor, which accounted for the desperate and cornered look on their faces. But now they were stuck.

Wolfe focused on the Inspector, who was seated in the rear over by the big globe, with Purley nearby. "If you don't mind, Mr. Cramer, first I'll clear up a little matter that is outside your interest."

Cramer nodded and shifted the cigar in his mouth to a new angle.

Wolfe changed his focus. "I'm sure you'll all be glad to hear this. Not that I formed my opinion so as to please you; I considered only the merits of the case. Without prejudice to her legal position, I feel that morally Mrs. Mion has no claim on Mr. James. As I said she would, she accepts my judgment. She makes no claim and will ask no payment for damages. You verify that before these witnesses, Mrs. Mion?"

"Certainly." Peggy was going to add something, but stopped it on the way out.

"This is wonderful!" Adele Bosley was out of her chair. "May I use a phone?"

"Later," Wolfe snapped at her. "Sit down, please."

"It seems to me," Judge Arnold observed, "that this could have been told to us on the phone. I had to cancel an important engagement." Lawyers are never satisfied.

"Quite true," Wolfe agreed mildly, "if that were all. But there's the matter of Mion's death. When I—"

"What had that got to do with it?"

"I'm about to tell you. Surely it isn't extraneous, since his death resulted, though indirectly, from the assault by Mr. James. But my interest goes beyond that. Mrs. Mion hired me not only to decide about the claim of her husband's estate against Mr. James—that is now closed—but also to investigate her husband's death. She was convinced he had not killed himself. She could not believe it was in his character to commit suicide. I have investigated and I am prepared to report to her."

"You don't need us here for that," Rupert the Fat said in a high squeak.

"I need one of you. I need the murderer."

"You still don't need *us*," Arnold said harshly.

"Hang it," Wolfe snapped, "then go! All but one of you. Go!"

Nobody made a move.

Wolfe gave them five seconds. "Then I'll go on," he said dryly. "As I say, I'm prepared to report, but the investigation is not concluded. One vital detail will require official sanction, and that's why Inspector Cramer is present. It will also need Mrs. Mion's concurrence; and I think it well to consult Dr. Lloyd too, since he signed the death certificate." His eyes went to Peggy. "First you, madam. Will you give your consent to the exhumation of your husband's body?"

She gawked at him. "What for?"

"To get evidence that he was murdered, and by whom. It is a reasonable expectation."

She stopped gawking. "Yes. I don't care." She thought he was just talking to hear himself.

Wolfe's eyes went left. "You have no objection, Dr. Lloyd?"

Lloyd was nonplused. "I have no idea," he said slowly and distinctly, "what you're getting at, but in any case I have no voice in the matter. I merely issued the certificate."

"Then you won't oppose it. Mr. Cramer, the basis for the request for official sanction will appear in a moment, but you should know that what will be required is an examination and report by Dr. Abraham Rentner of Mount Sinai Hospital."

"You don't get an exhumation just because you're curious," Cramer growled.

"I know it. I'm more than curious." Wolfe's eyes traveled. "You all know, I suppose, that one of the chief reasons, probably the main one, for the police decision that Mion had committed suicide was the manner of his death. Of course other details had to fit—for instance, the presence of the gun beside the body—and they did. But the determining factor was the assumption that a man cannot be murdered by sticking the barrel of a revolver in his mouth and pulling the trigger unless he is first made unconscious; and there was no evidence that Mion had been either struck or drugged.

"However, though that assumption is ordinarily sound, surely this case was an exception. It came to my mind at once, when Mrs. Mion first consulted me. For there was present—but I'll show you with a simple demonstration. Archie, get a gun."

I opened my third drawer and got one out.

"Is it loaded?"

I flipped it open to check. "No, sir."

Wolfe returned to the audience. "You, I think, Mr. James. As an opera singer you should be able to follow stage directions. Stand up, please. This is a serious matter, so do it right. You are a patient with a sore throat, and Mr. Goodwin is your doctor. He will ask you to open your mouth so he can look at your throat. You are to do exactly what you would naturally do under those circumstances. Will you do that?"

"But it's obvious." James, standing, was looking grim. "I don't need to."

"Nevertheless, please indulge me. There's a certain detail. Will you do it as naturally as possible?"

"Yes."

"Good. Will the rest of you all watch Mr. James's face? Closely. Go ahead, Archie."

With the gun in my pocket I moved in front of James and told him to open wide. He did so. For a moment his eyes came to mine as I peered into his throat, and then slanted upward. Not in a hurry, I took the gun from my pocket and poked it into his mouth until it it touched the roof. He jerked back and dropped into his chair.

"Did you see the gun?" Wolfe demanded.

"No. My eyes were up."

"Just so." Wolfe looked at the others. "You saw his eyes go up? They always do. Try it yourselves some time. I tried it in my bedroom Sunday evening. So it is by no means impossible to kill a man that way. It isn't even difficult, if you're his doctor and he has something wrong with his throat. You agree, Dr. Lloyd?"

Dr. Lloyd had not joined the general movement to watch James's face during the demonstration. He hadn't stirred a muscle. Now his jaw was twitching a little, but that was all.

He did his best to smile. "To show that a thing could happen," he said in a pretty good voice, "isn't the same thing as proving it did happen."

"Indeed it isn't," Wolfe conceded. "Though we do have some facts. You have no effective alibi. Mion would have admitted you to his studio at any time without question. You could have managed easily to get the gun from the base of Caruso's bust, and slipped it into your pocket without being seen. For you, as for no one else, he would upon request have stood with his mouth wide open, inviting his doom. He was killed shortly after you had been compelled to make an appointment for Dr. Rentner to examine him. We do have those facts, don't we?"

"They prove nothing," Dr. Lloyd insisted. His voice was not quite as good now. He came out of his chair to his feet. It did not look as if the movement had any purpose; apparently he simply couldn't stay put in his chair, and the muscles had acted on their own. And it had been a mistake because, standing upright, he began to tremble.

"They'll help," Wolfe told him, "if we can get one more—and I suspect we can, or what are you quivering about? What was it, Doctor? Some unfortunate blunder? Had you botched the operation and ruined his voice forever? I suppose that was it, since the threat to your reputation and career was grave enough to make you resort to murder. Anyhow we'll soon know, when Dr. Rentner makes his examination and reports. I don't expect you to furnish—"

"It wasn't a blunder!" Lloyd squawked. "It could have happened to anyone—"

Whereupon he did blunder. I think what made him lose his head completely was hearing his own voice and realizing it was a hysterical squawk and he couldn't help it.

He made a dash for the door.

I knocked Judge Arnold down in my rush across the room, which was unnecessary, for by the time I arrived Purley Stebbins had Dr. Lloyd by the collar, and Cramer was there too.

Hearing a commotion behind me, I turned around. Clara James had made a dive for Peggy Mion, screeching something I didn't catch, but her father and Adele Bosley had stopped her and were getting her under control. Judge Arnold and Rupert the Fat were excitedly telling Wolfe how wonderful he was. Peggy was apparently weeping, from the way her shoulders were shaking, but I couldn't see her face because it was buried on Fred's shoulder, and his arms had her tight.

Nobody wanted me or needed me, so I went to the kitchen for a glass of milk.

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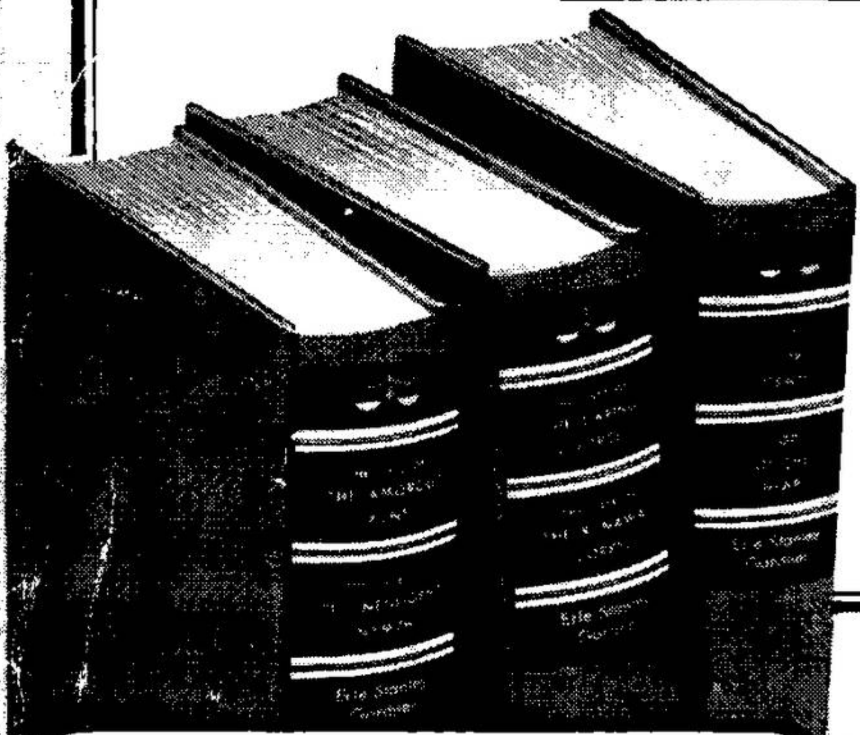

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